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King

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(54) **REDUCED FRICTION CATHETER
INTRODUCER AND METHOD OF
MANUFACTURING AND USING THE SAME**

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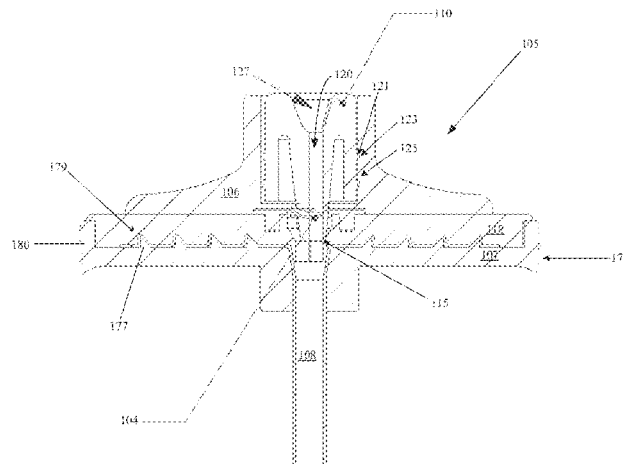
See application file for complete search history.

(57)

ABSTRACT

Tear-away sheath introducers for catheters, methods for making such introducers, and methods for using such introducers are described. A splittable sheath introducer may include a sheath, a hub disposed at a proximal end of the sheath, a valve included with the hub, and a valve actuator movable from a first position to a second position, the valve actuator opening the valve when in the second position. The valve actuator may include a retaining member that enables the valve actuator to be retained by a portion of the hub when the sheath introducer is split apart.

8 Claims, 26 Drawing Sheets



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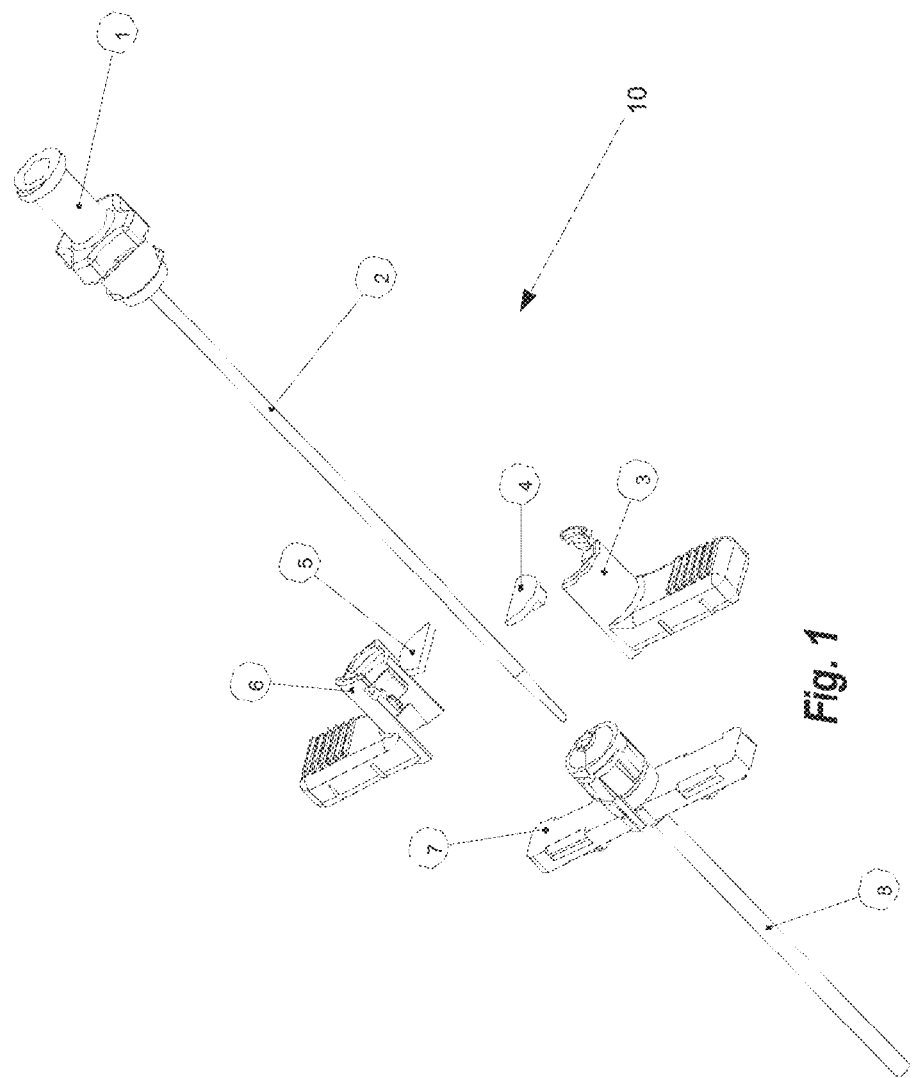


Fig. 1

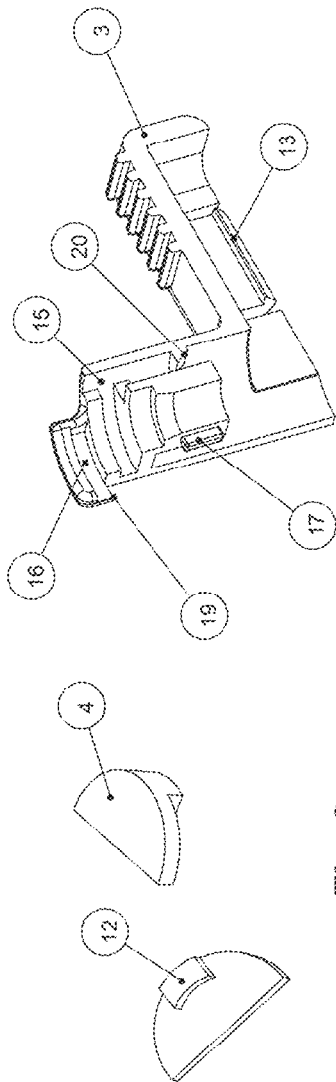


Fig. 2

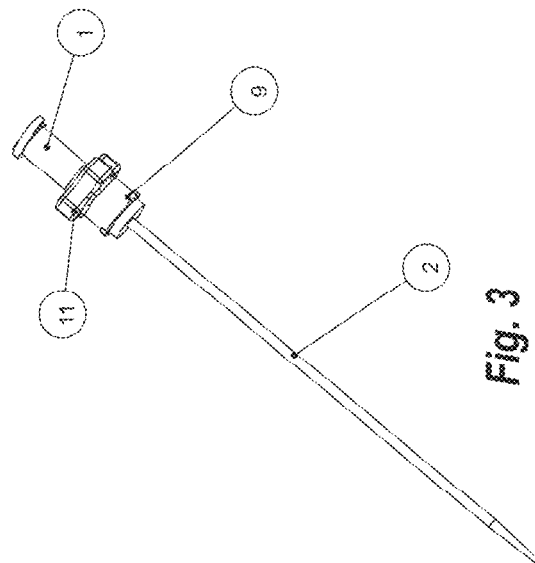


Fig. 3

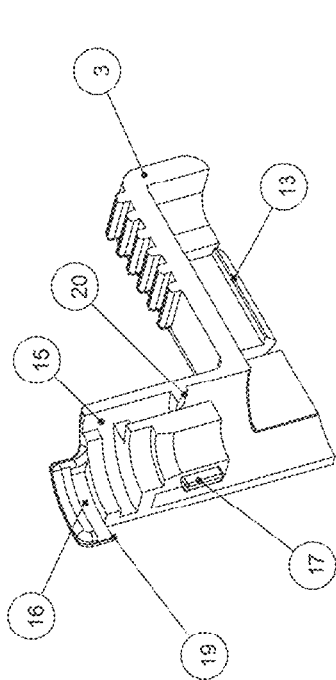


Fig. 4

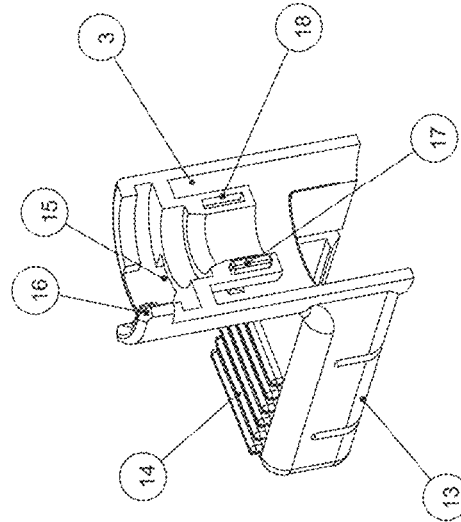
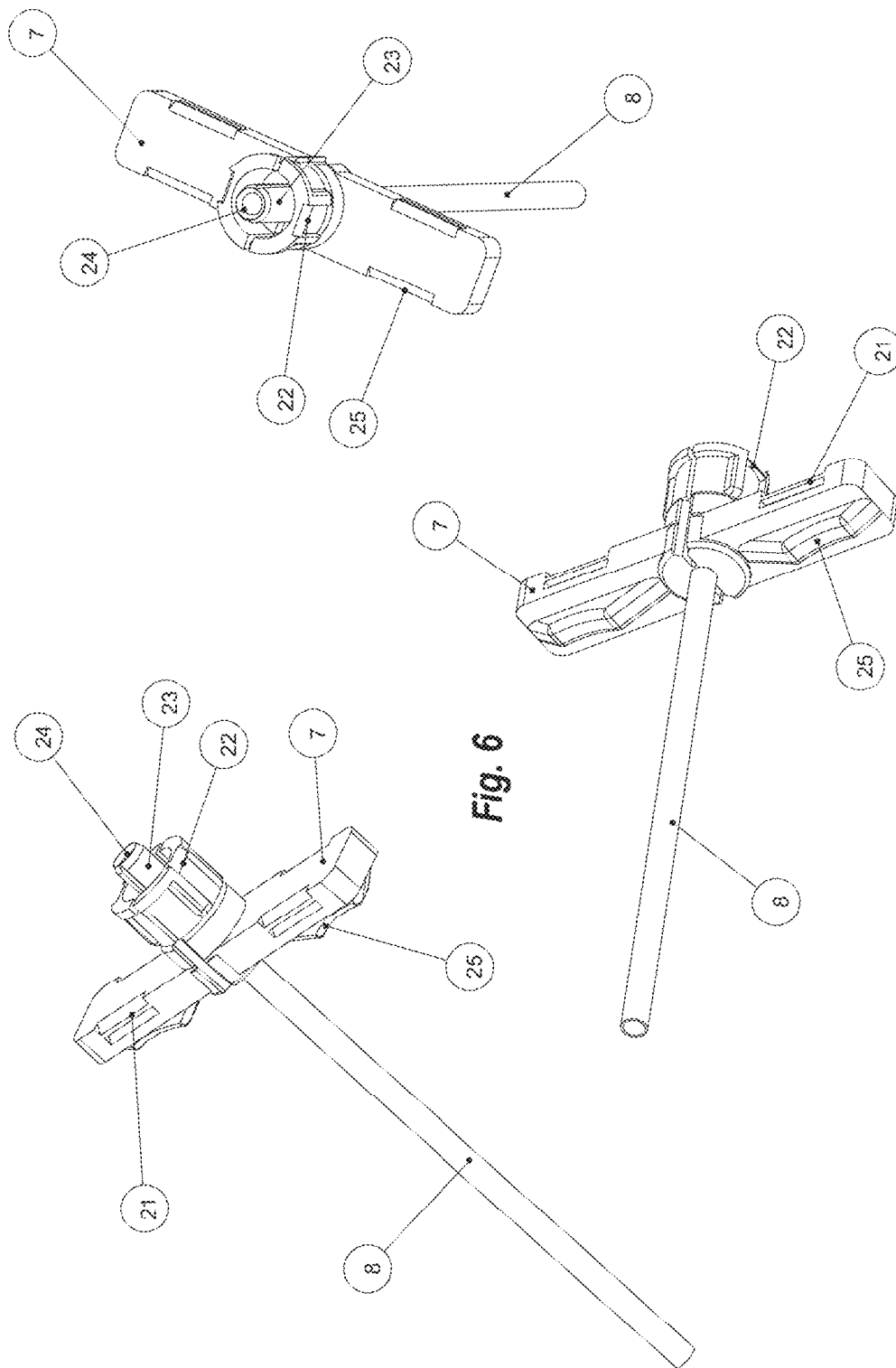
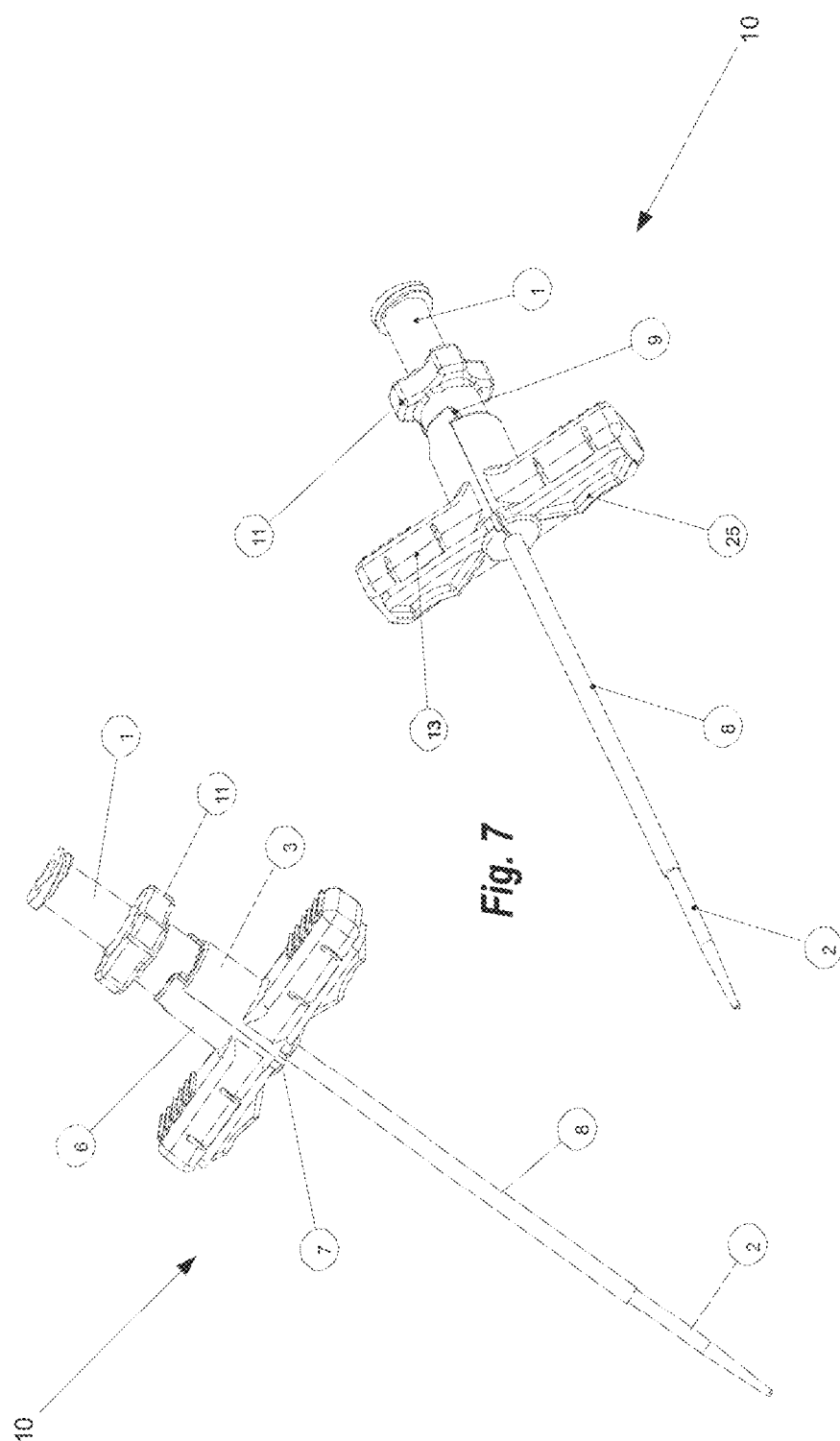
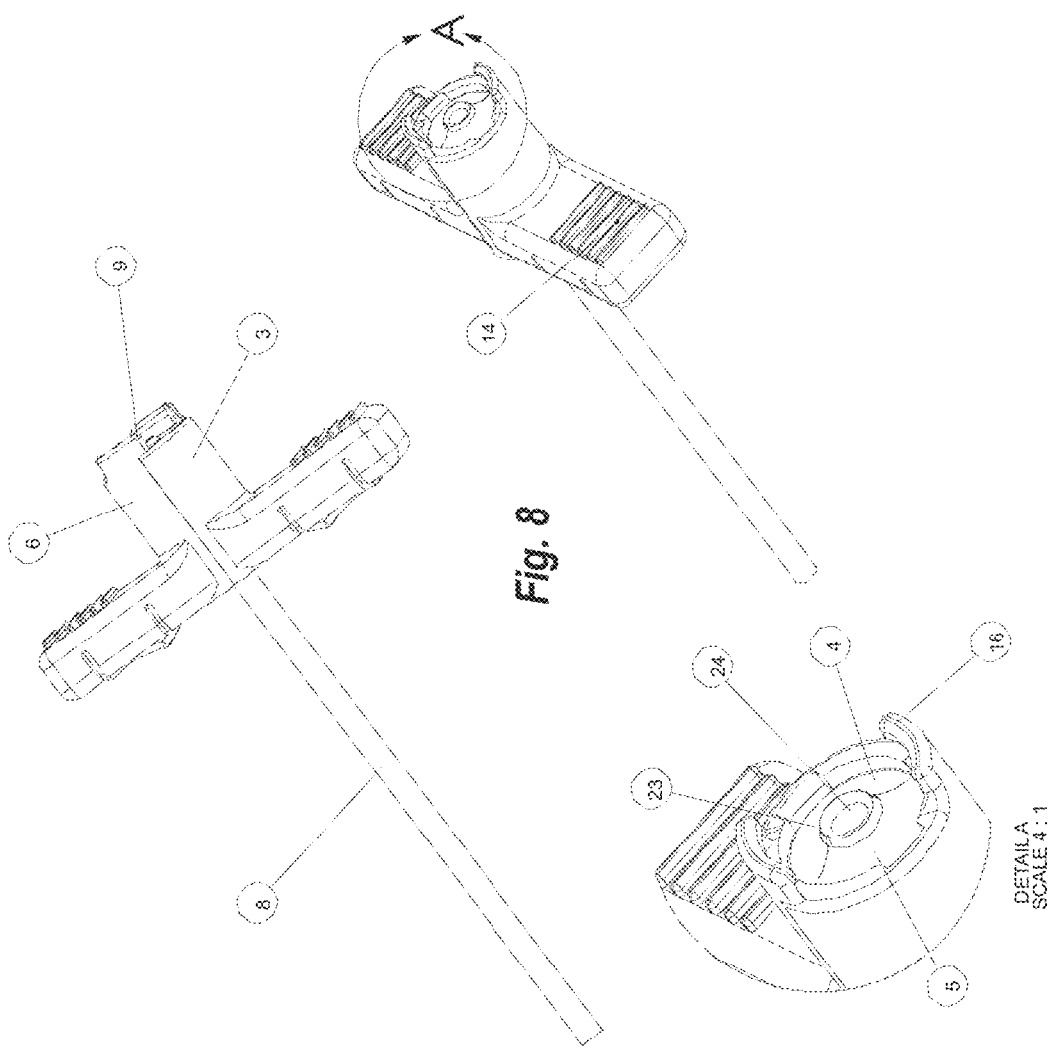
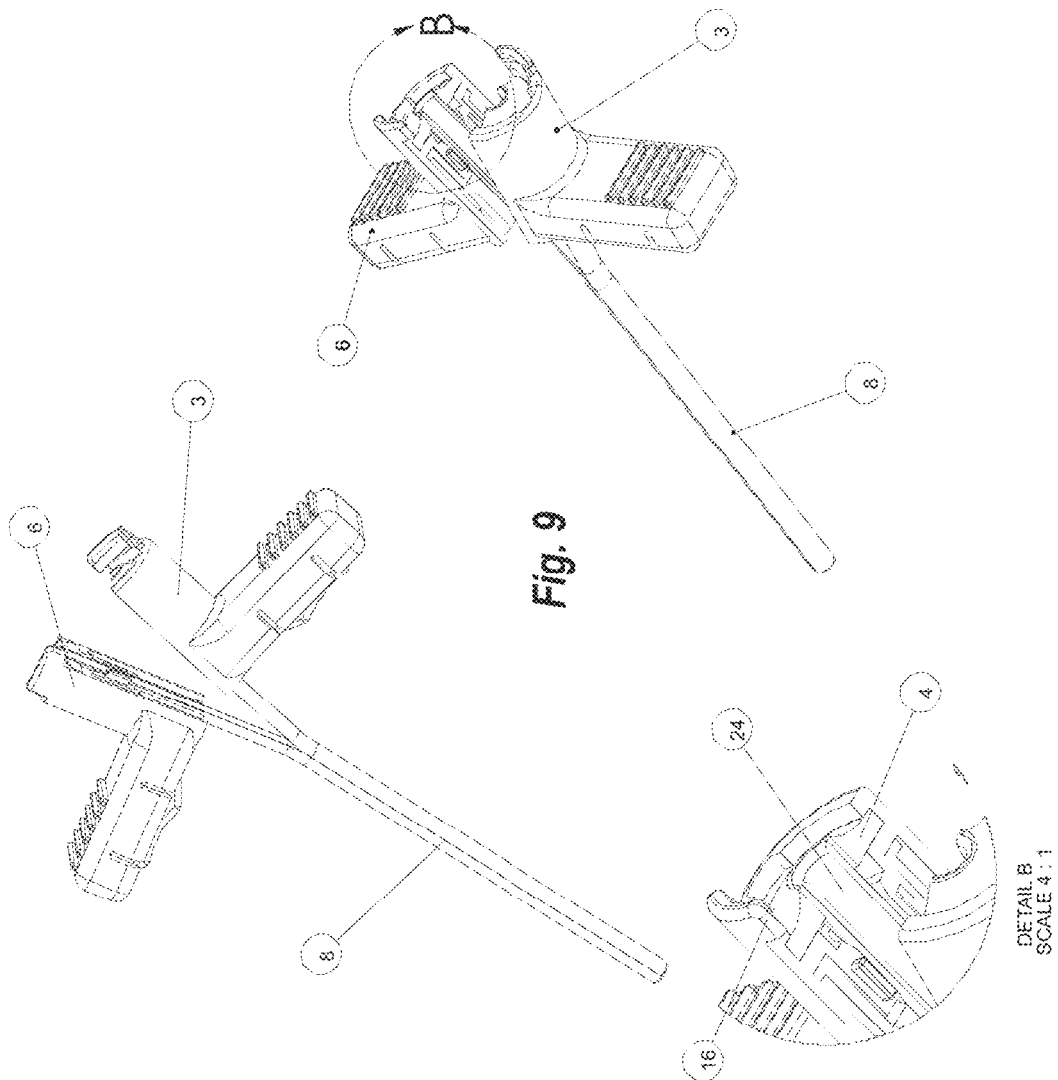


Fig. 5









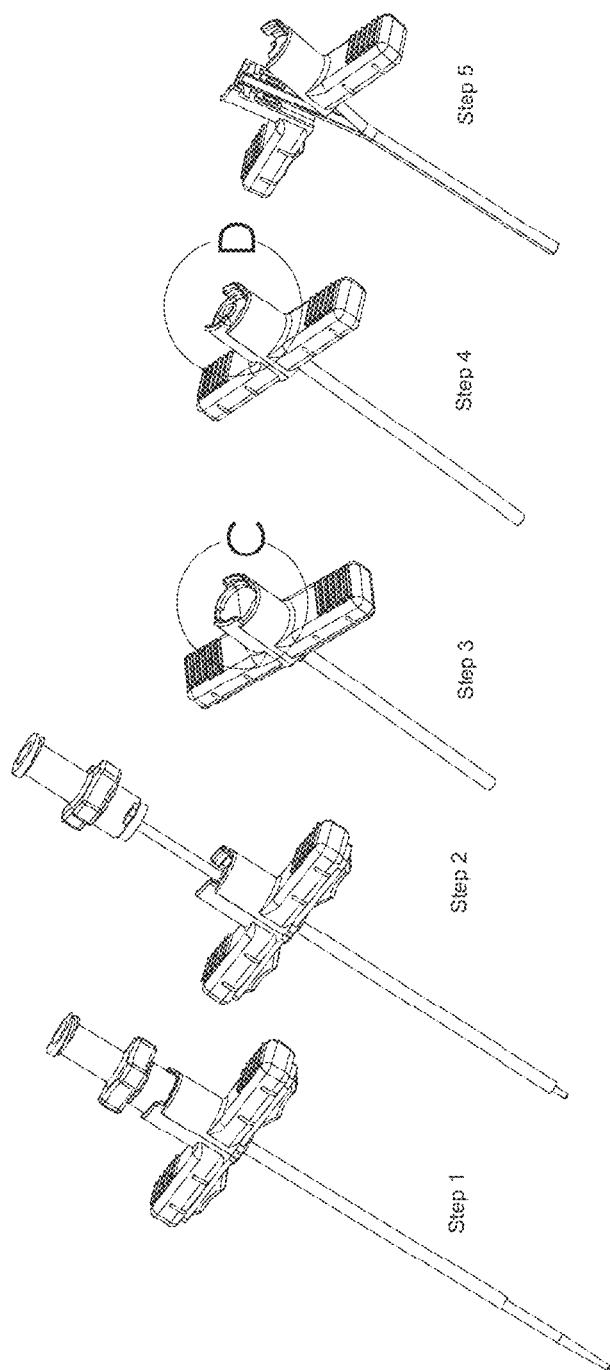
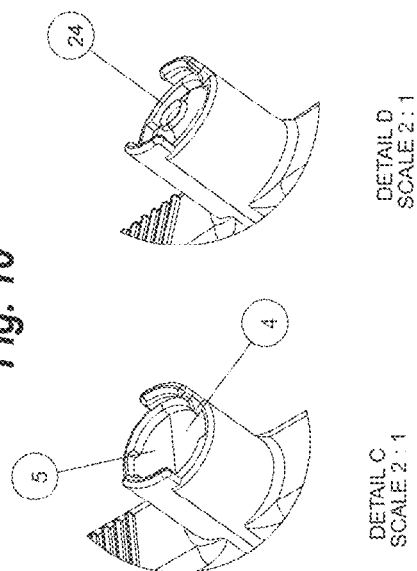


Fig. 10



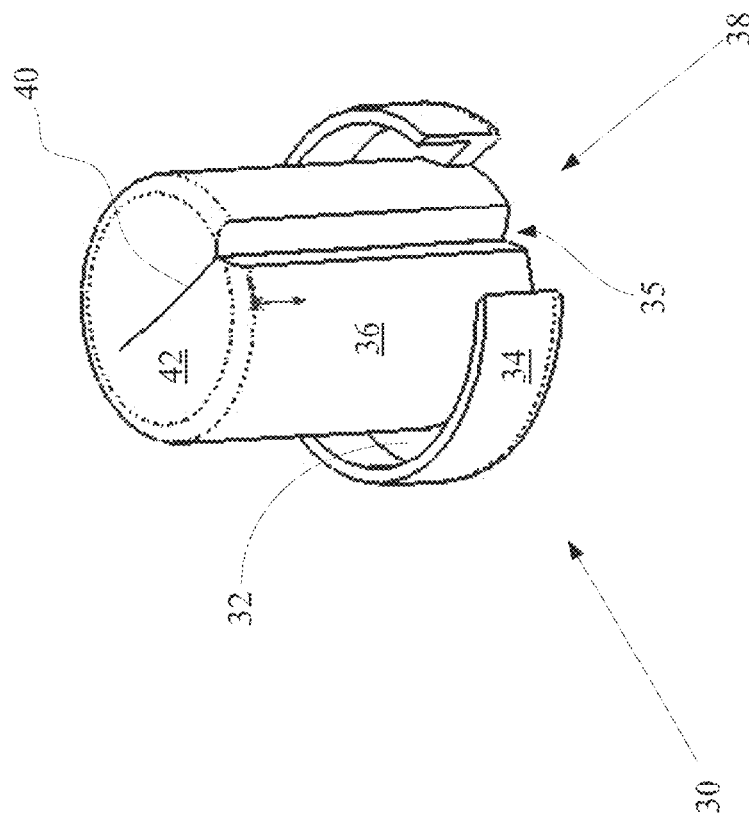


Fig. 11

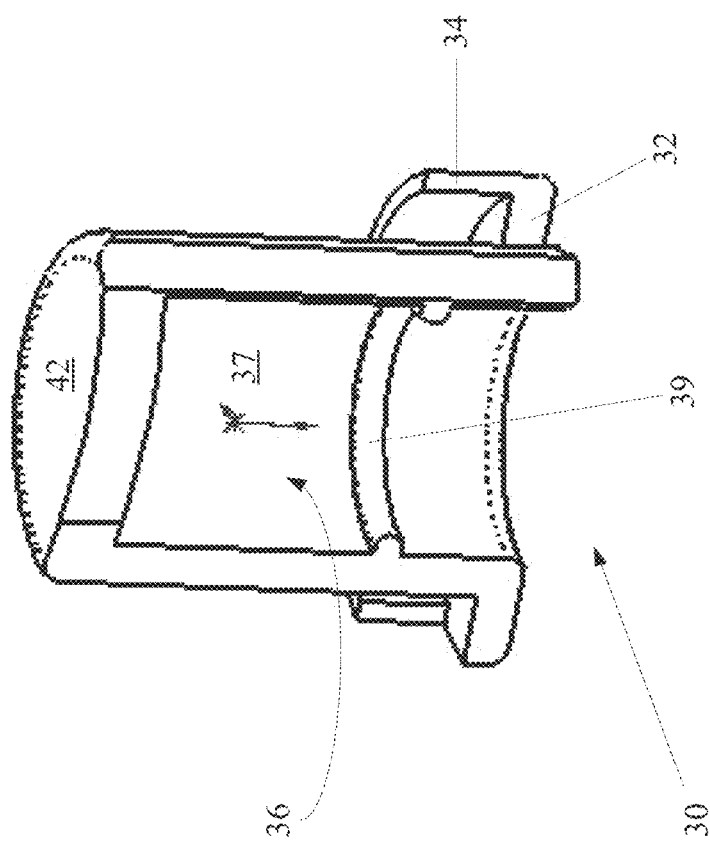


Fig. 12

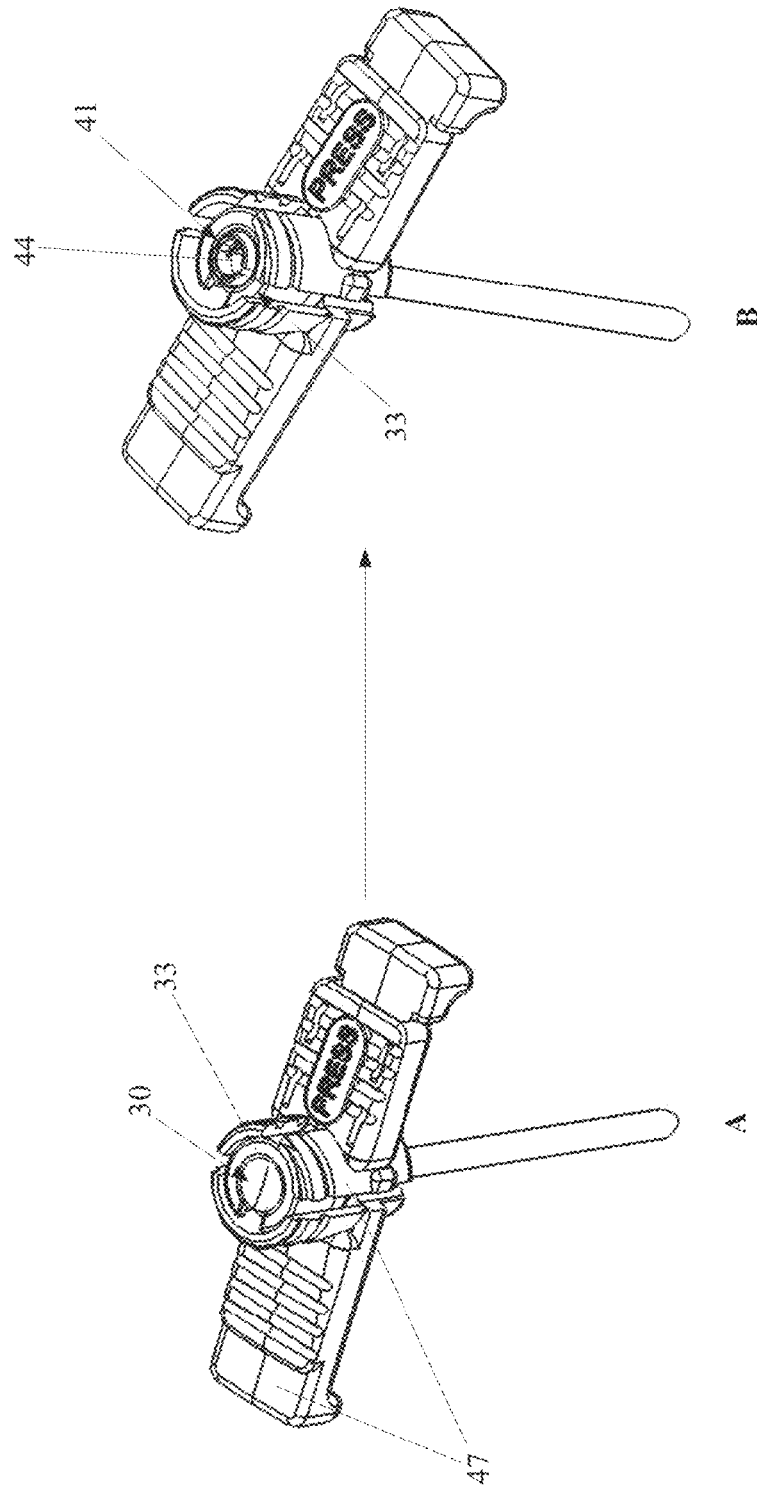


Fig. 13

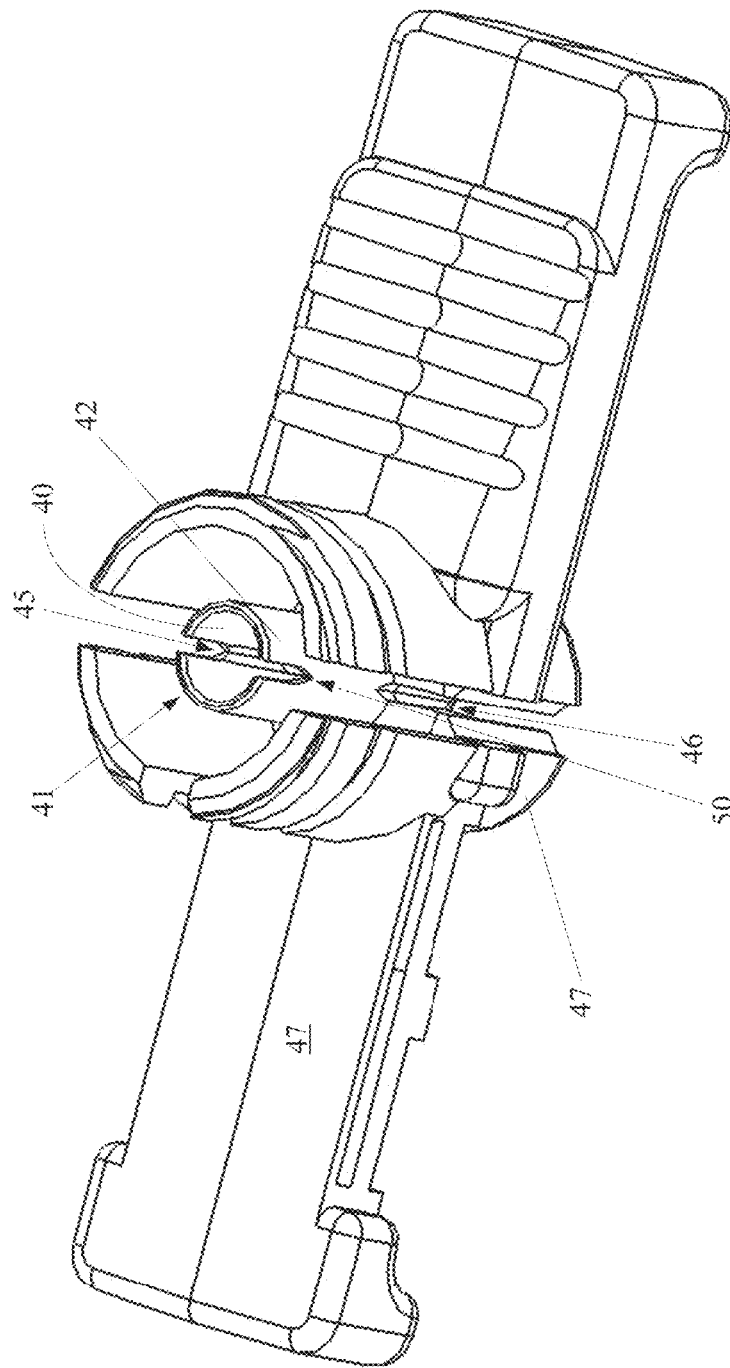


Fig. 14

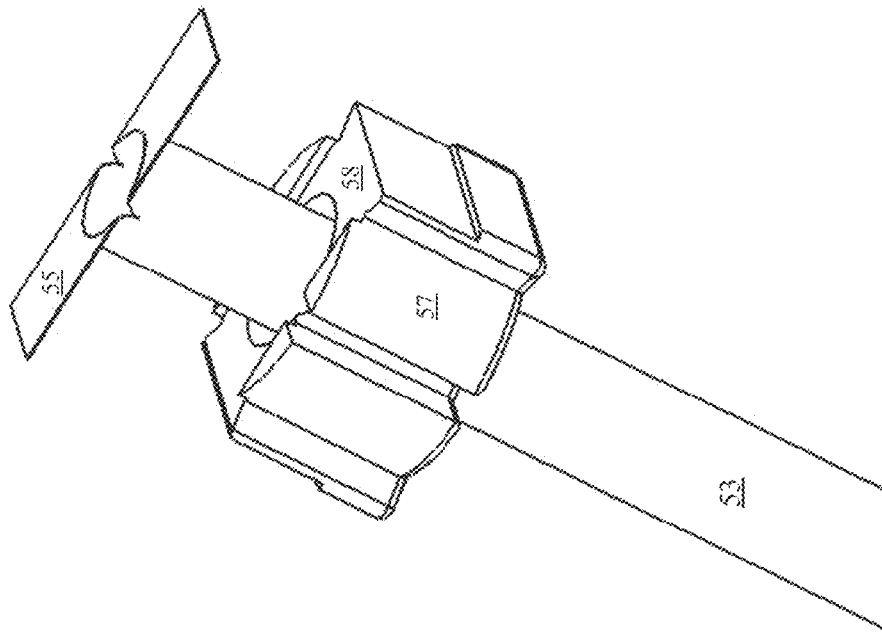


Fig. 15

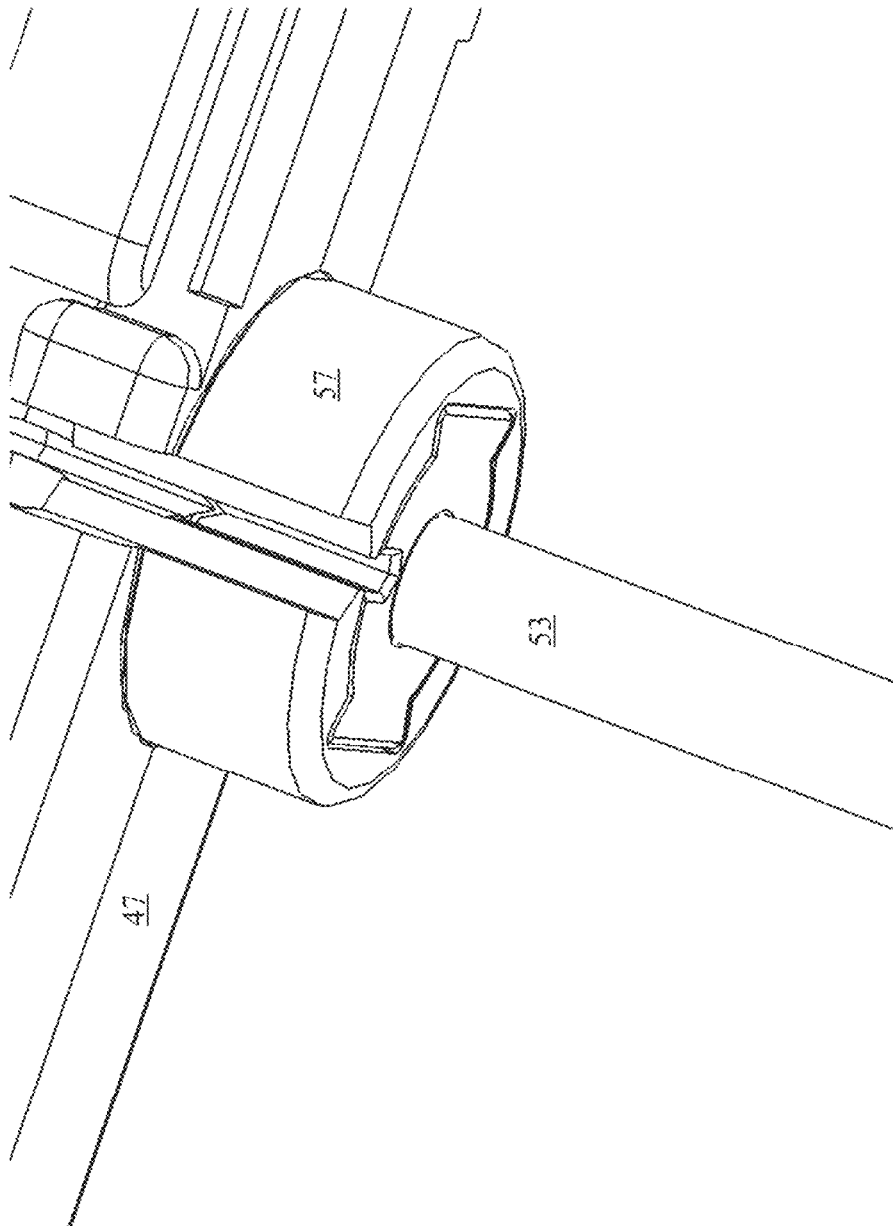


Fig. 16

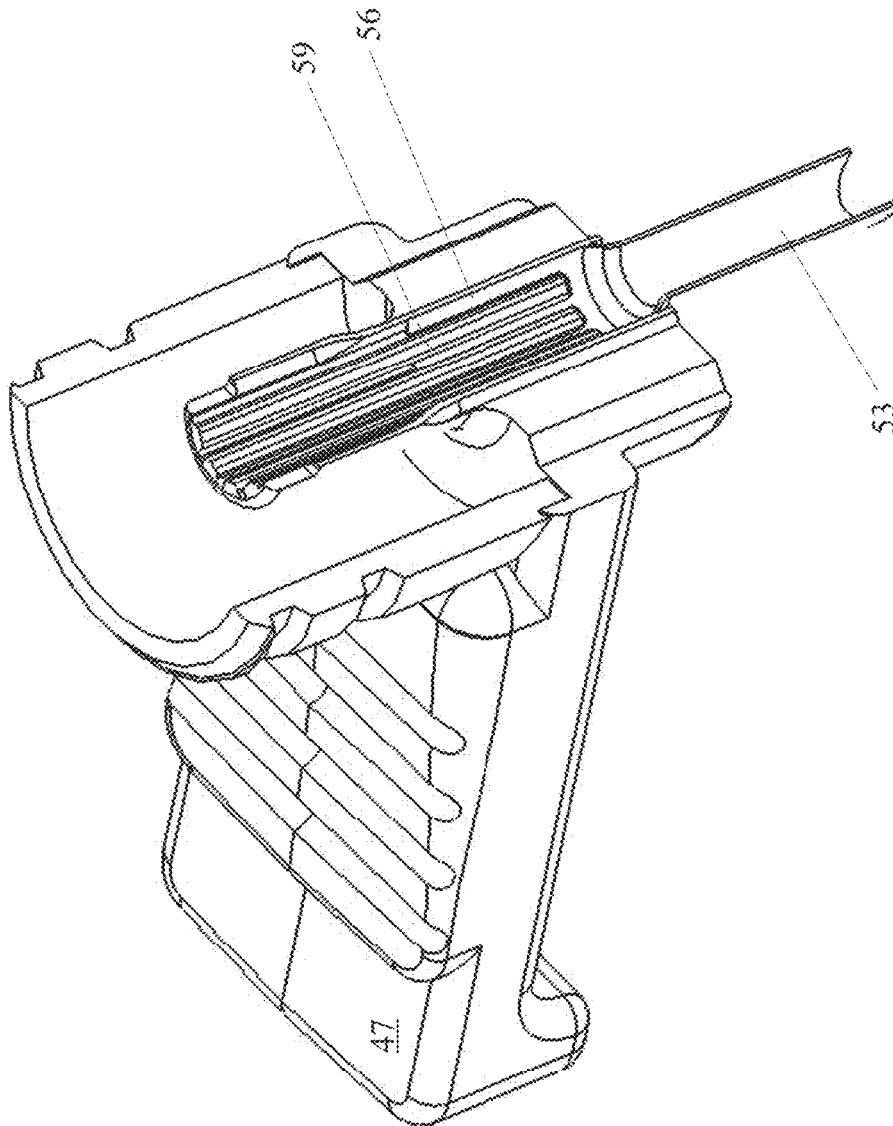


Fig. 17

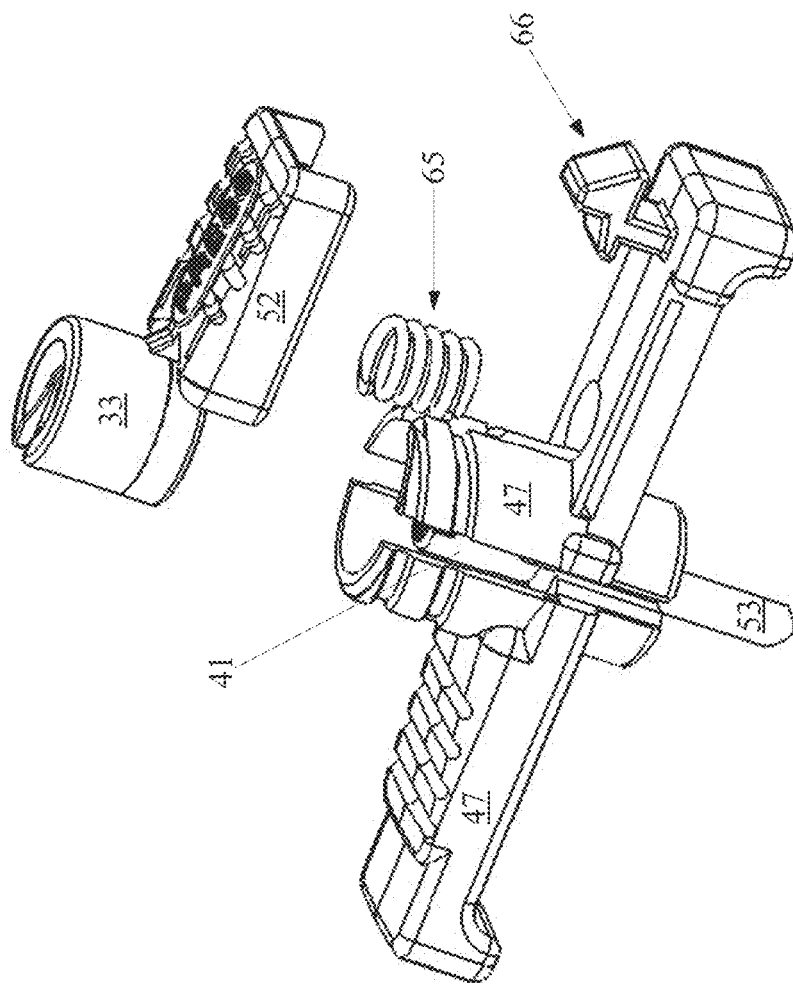


Fig. 18

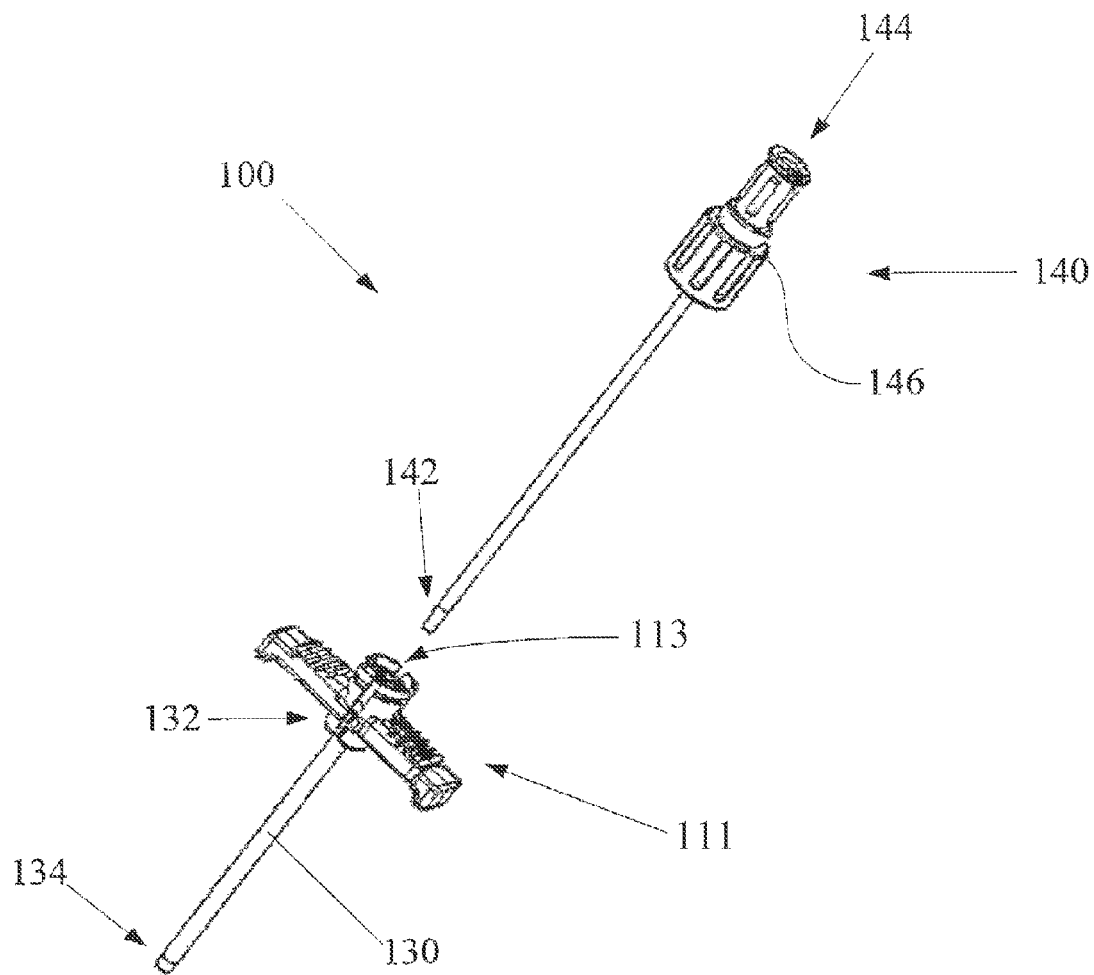


FIGURE 19
(PRIOR ART)

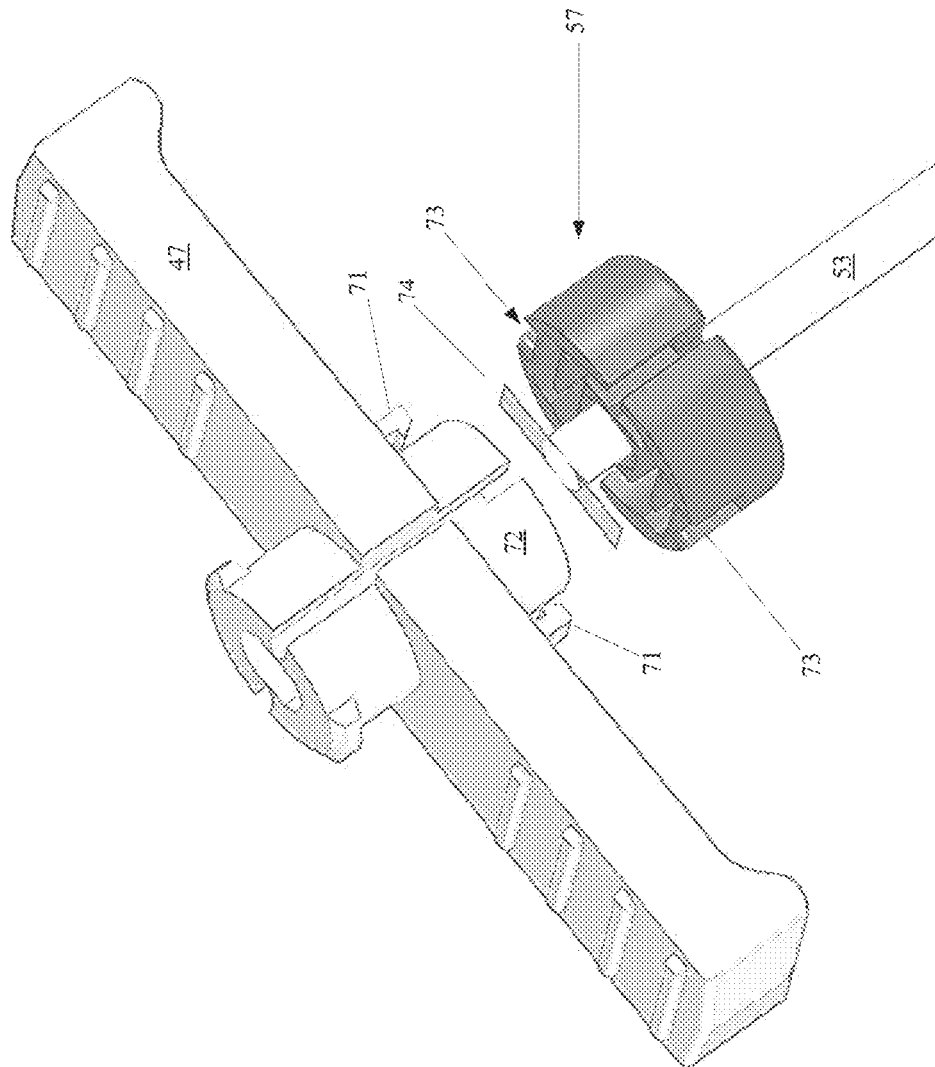


Fig. 20

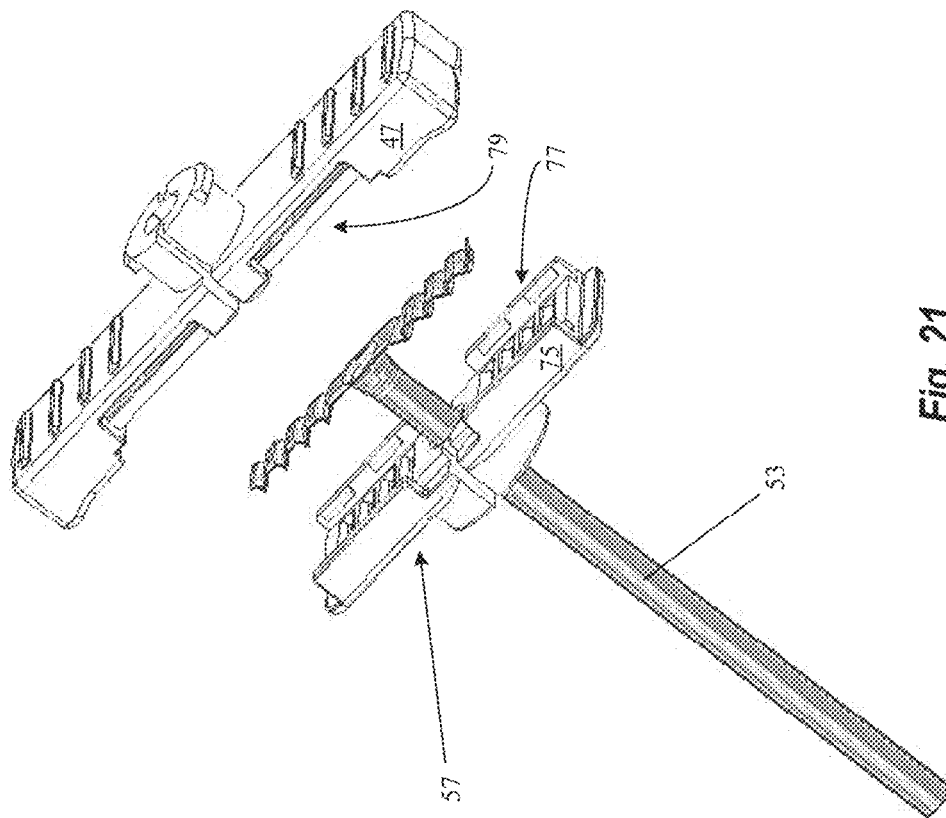


Fig. 21

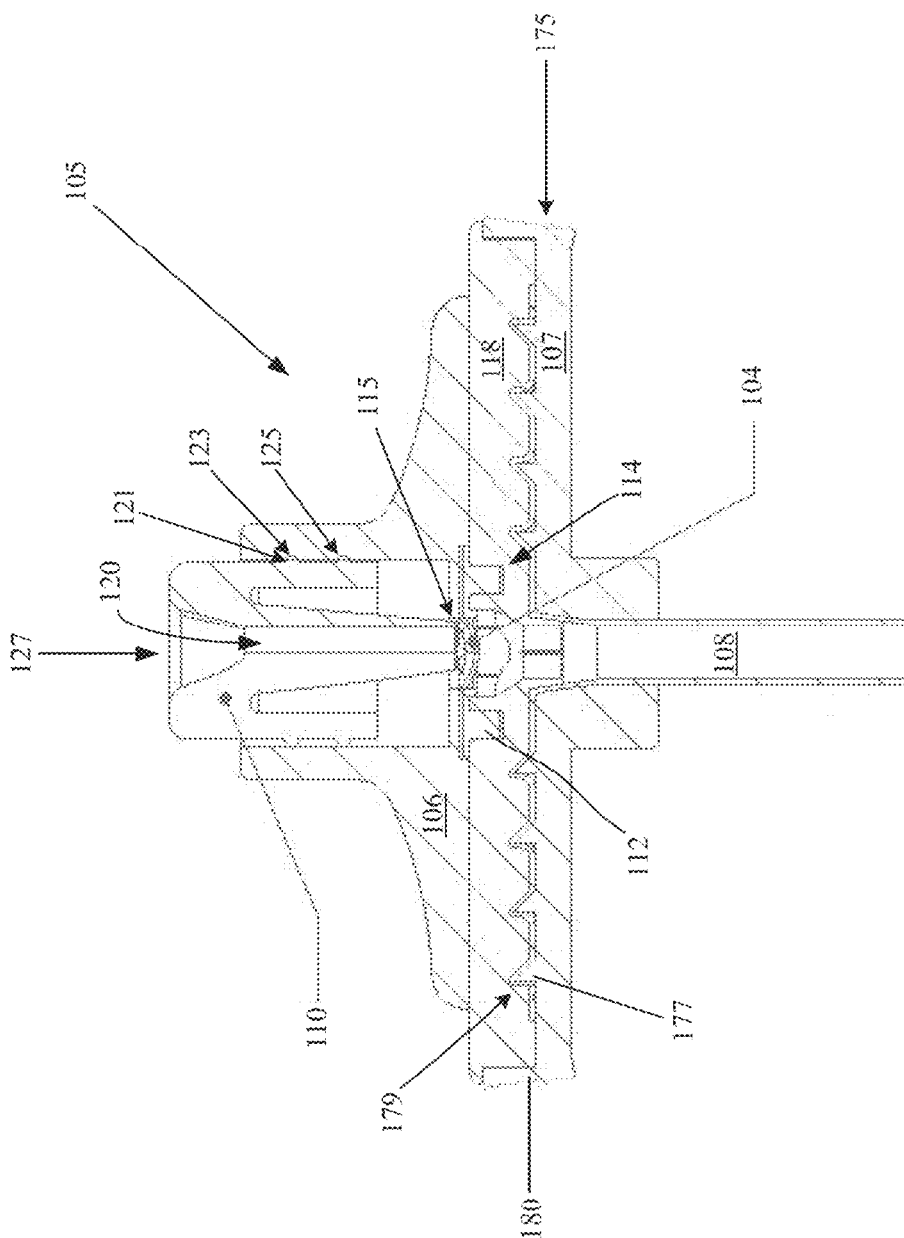
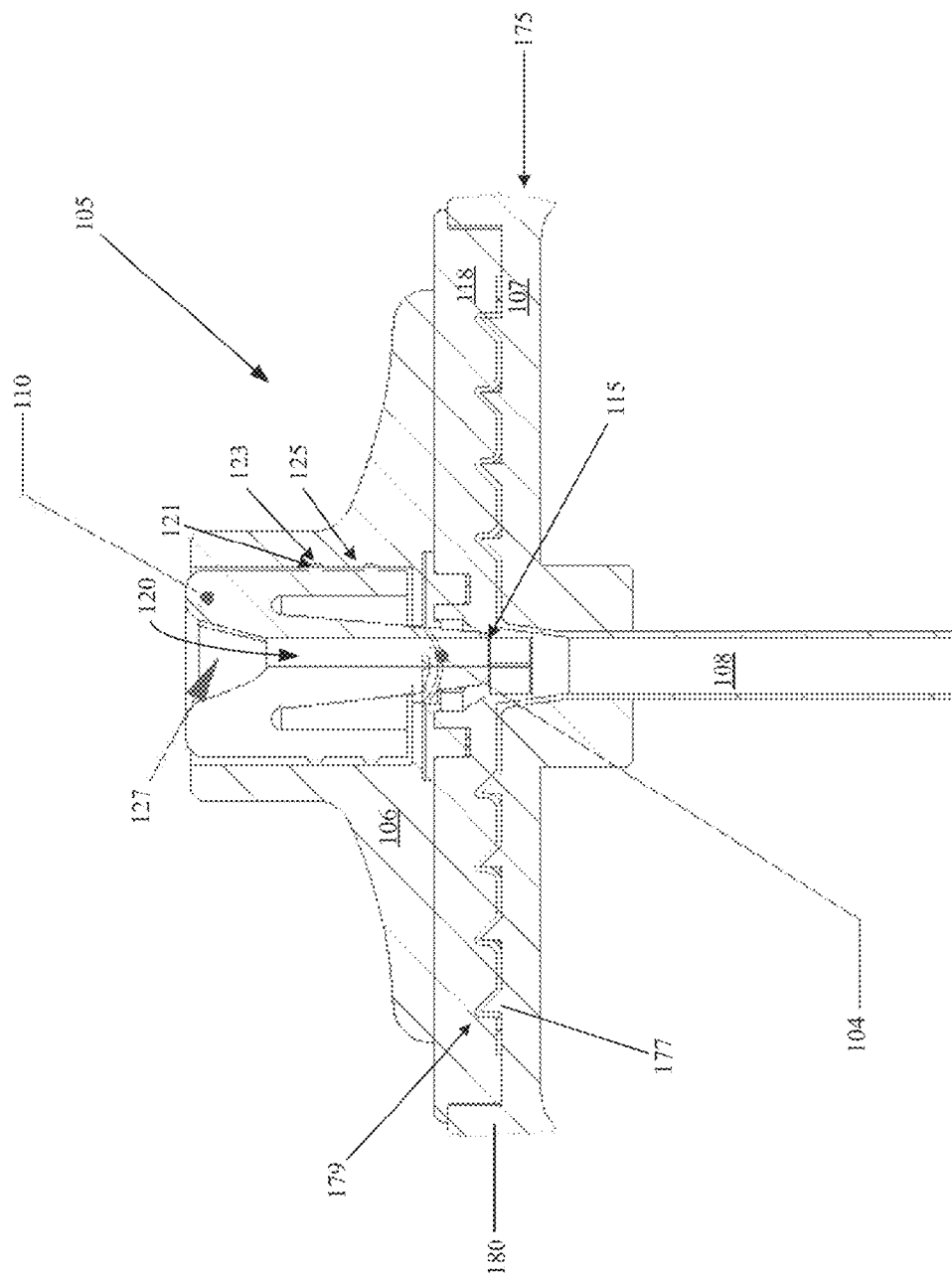


Fig. 22



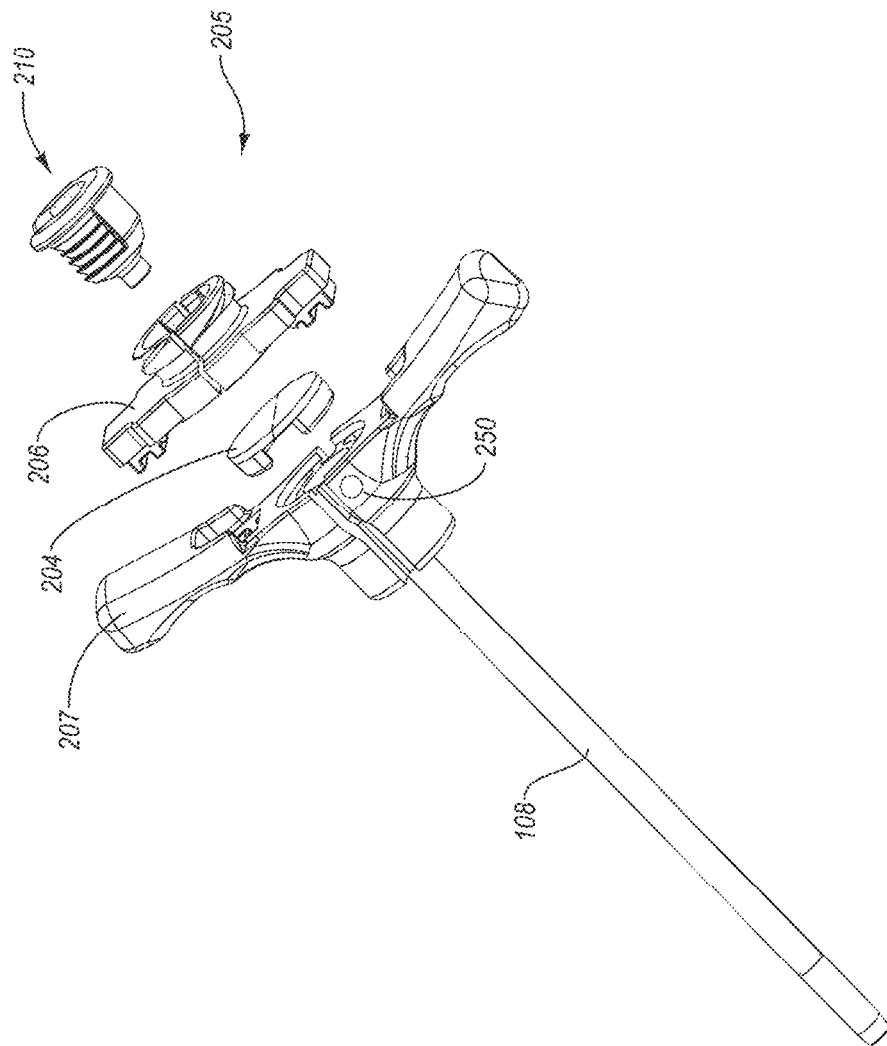


Fig. 24A

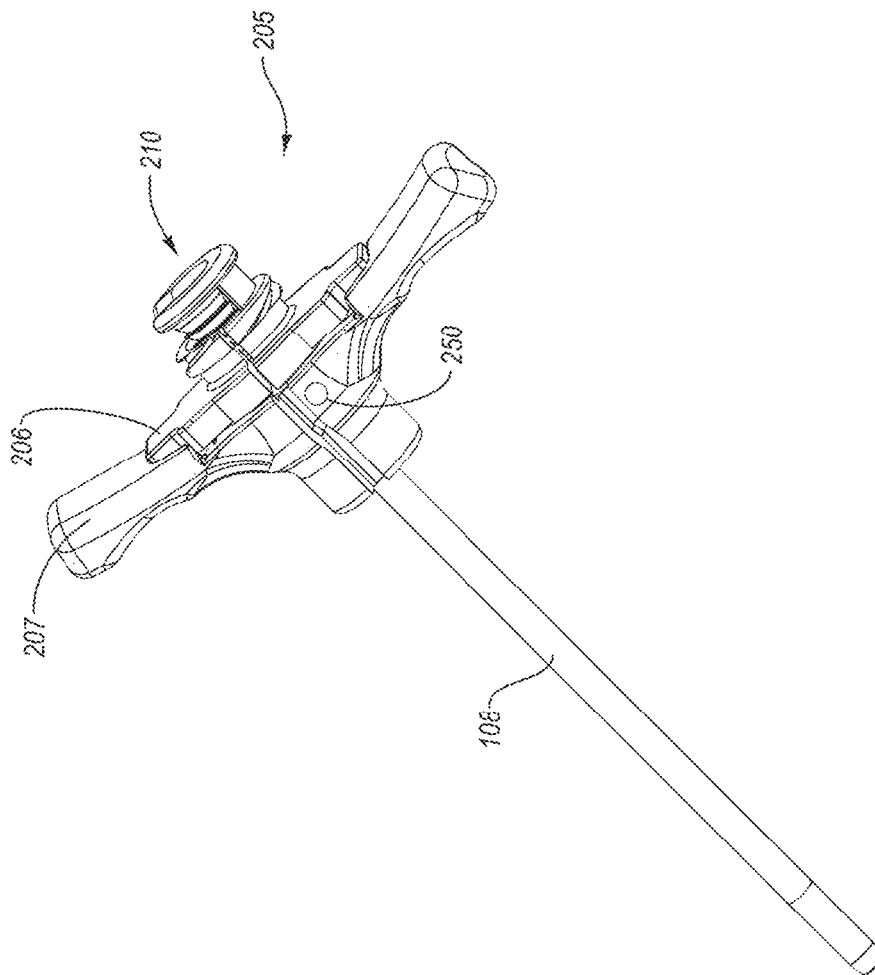


Fig. 24B

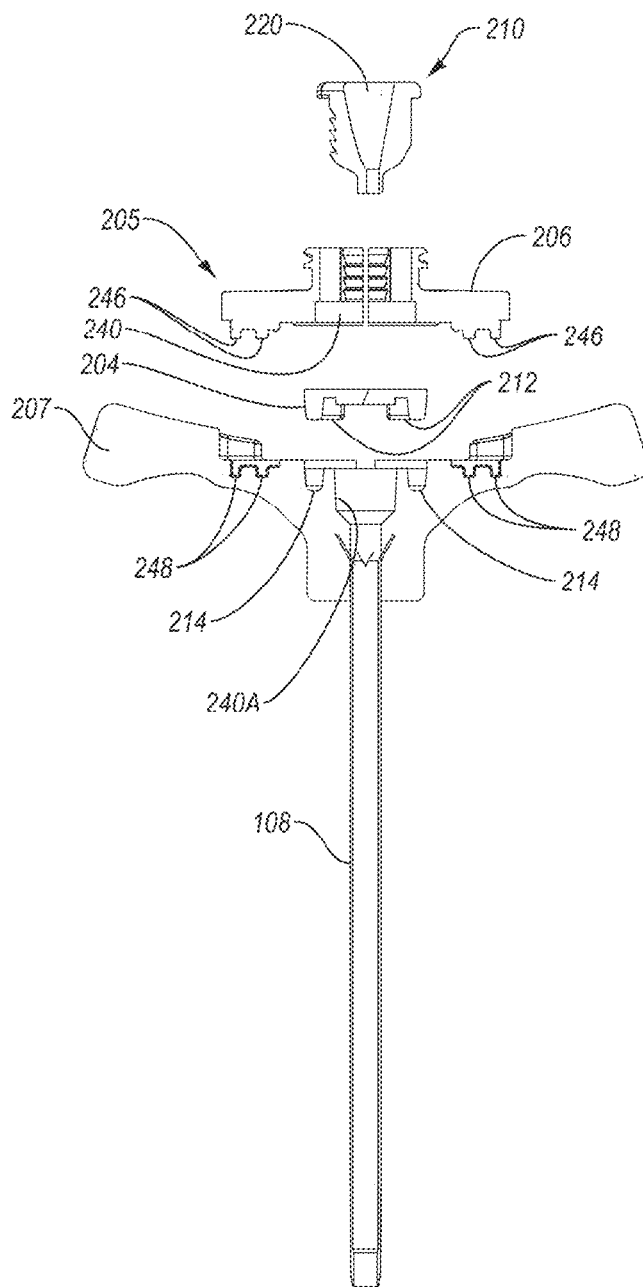


Fig. 25

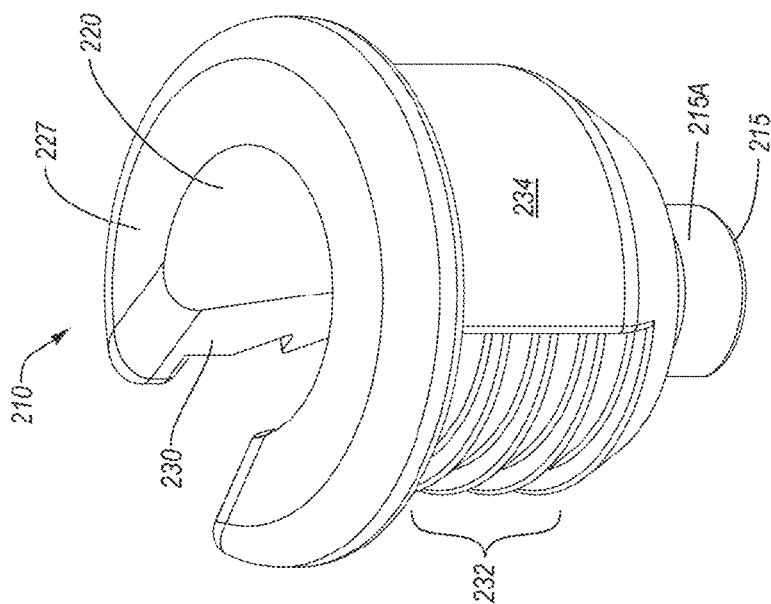


Fig. 26B

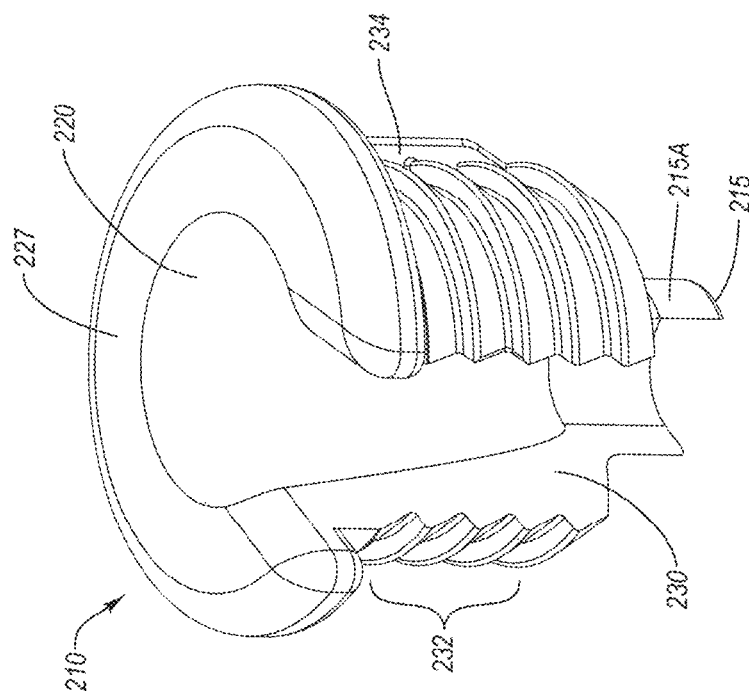
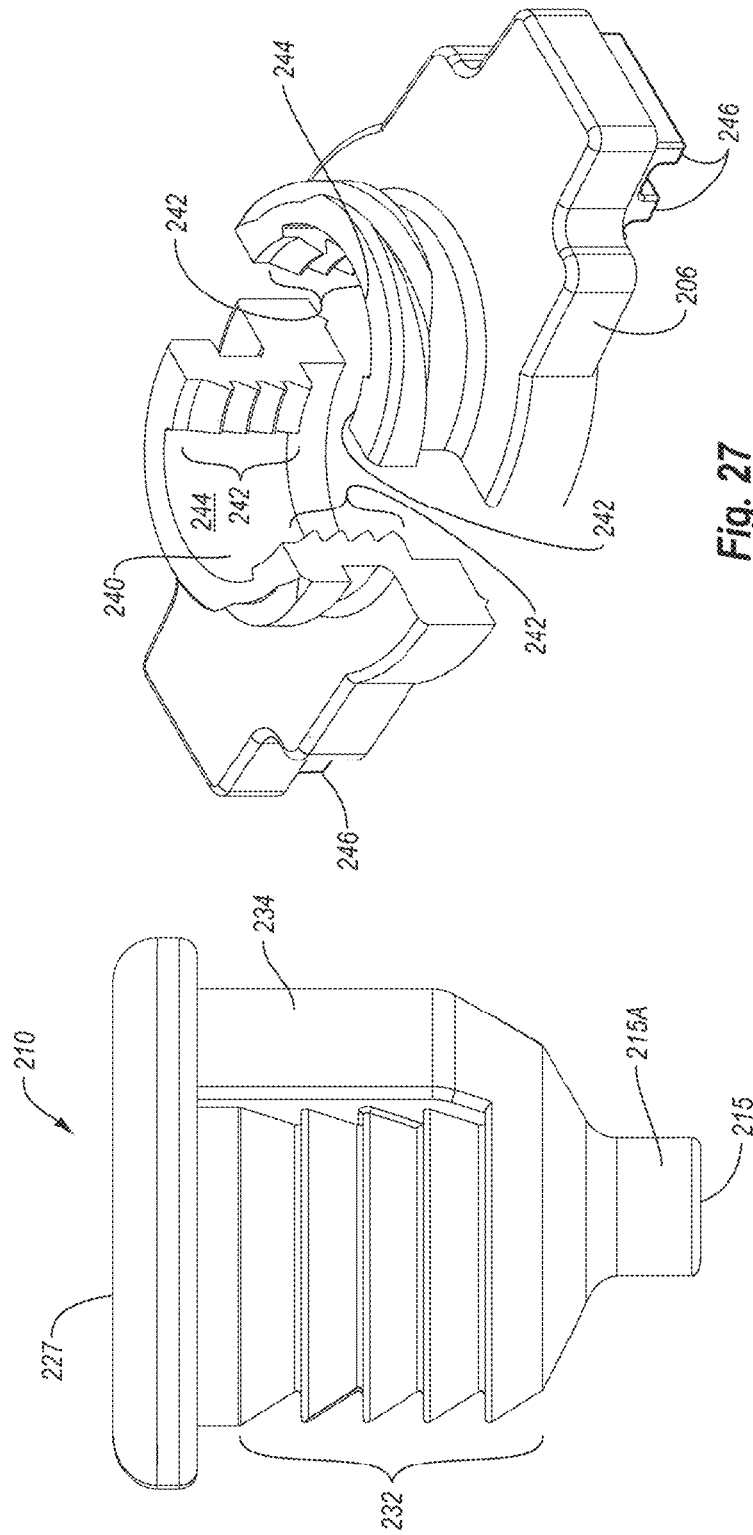


Fig. 26A



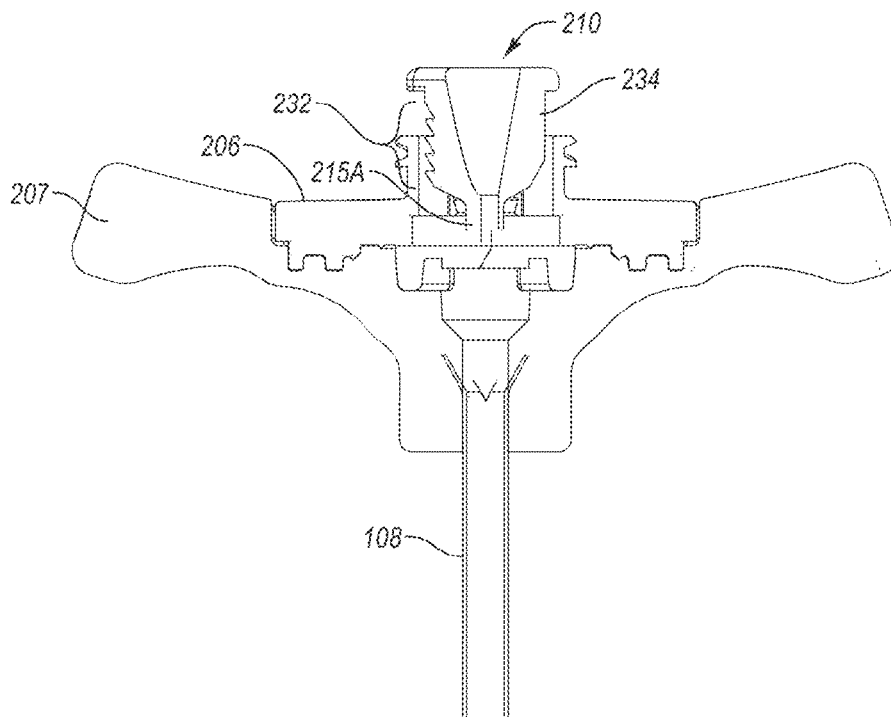


Fig. 28A

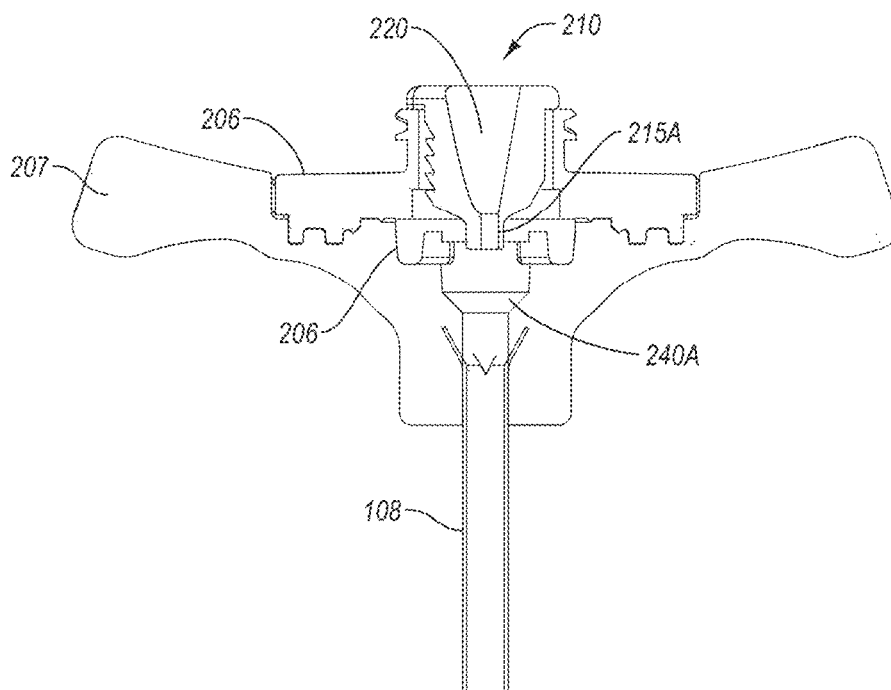


Fig. 28B

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REDUCED FRICTION CATHETER INTRODUCER AND METHOD OF MANUFACTURING AND USING THE SAME

REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 12/399,749, filed Mar. 6, 2009, now U.S. Pat. No. 8,403,890, which is a continuation-in-part of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 11/531,339, filed Sep. 13, 2006, now U.S. Pat. No. 8,932,260, which is a continuation-in-part of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 11/288,959, filed Nov. 29, 2005, which claims the benefit of priority to U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 60/631,397, filed Nov. 29, 2004, each of which applications is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The invention relates to medical devices and methods for manufacturing such medical devices. In particular, the invention relates to introducers for catheters, methods for making such introducers, and methods for using such introducers. More particularly, the invention relates to self-sealing sheath introducers (both tear-away and non-tear-away), methods for manufacturing such introducers, and methods of using such introducers in medical procedures.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Tear-away sheath introducers ("sheath introducers" or "introducers") and their use as medical devices are well known in the art. See, for example U.S. Pat. Nos. 6,814,718, 6,808,520, 6,808,509, 6,796,991, 6,740,101, 6,712,791, 6,712,789, 6,695,810, 6,641,564, 6,632,234, 6,623,460, 6,599,302, 6,361,559, and 5,558,652, as well as U.S. Patent Applications Nos. 20040260243, 20040254534, 20040176781, 2004006330, 2004097863, and 2002072789, the disclosures of which are incorporated herein by reference. These introducers are used in medical procedures to insert a catheter into the body and provide vascular access to the vessel of a patient. The catheters are inserted via the introducers by first using a needle to create an access site. A dilator is then used to dilate the access site to allow a larger-diameter sheath introducer to be introduced into the vessel through the access site. The catheter is then inserted through the sheath introducer and into the vessel. After the catheter has been inserted, the sheath introducer is removed, leaving the catheter in the vessel.

As shown in FIG. 19, conventional tear-away (or split) sheath introducers **100** usually contain four major components: (1) a dilator **140**; (2) a tear-away sheath hub **111**; (3) a tear-away valve **113**; and (4) a tear-away sheath **130**. The dilator **140** facilitates insertion of the sheath introducer **100** into the vascular system and maintains the inside diameter of the sheath **130** during insertion. The dilator **140** is normally locked into the hub **111** in order to keep it seated within the sheath **130**. The dilator **140** typically contains a tapered tip **142** to facilitate insertion into the vascular system with the other end **144** of the dilator containing a standard medical luer hub **146**. Both the distal end **142** and the proximal end **144** of the dilator **140** are usually manufactured of a rigid polymer.

The tear-away hub **111** provides a means to contain the valve **113** while connecting the valve **113** and the sheath **130**. The hub **111** typically has a "T" shape with the opposing ends of the "T" being grasped and pulled to split both the valve **113** and sheath **130**. Thus, the hub **111** provides a mechanism to

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split the sheath **130** into two portions and allow the introducer to be split and removed from around the catheter. The hub **111** is also often manufactured of a rigid polymer.

The tear-away valve **113**, however, is typically made of a flexible material (such as silicone) that provides a self-sealing slit. The valve **113** may be designed as one piece that tears in half during the splitting procedure, or as two (or more) pieces that separate from each other during the splitting procedure. With conventional introducers, the valve **113** is encapsulated by the hub **111**.

The tear-away sheath **130** is normally manufactured as a thin-walled structure, often as an extrusion. The extrusion contains splitting means, i.e., score lines that facilitate splitting or a self-splitting propagating material (such as linearly-directional extrusion). The proximal end **132** of the sheath **130** is attached to the hub **111** using over-molding or any other known attachment mechanism. The distal end **134** of the sheath **130** can be tapered to provide a smooth transition at the dilator/sheath interface.

To use the introducer **100**, it is inserted in the desired vessel. Then the dilator **140** is unlocked from the hub **111** and removed to allow room for a catheter (or any similar medical device) to be inserted into the sheath. The valve **113** remains stationary inside the hub **111** and blocks air and/or fluid from flowing through the sheath **130** and hub **111** when they are left behind after the dilator is removed. The valve **113** keeps the passage **105** clear until a catheter is inserted into the passage **105** through the valve.

The introducer **100** is typically used for larger catheters, i.e., those with a diameter of 12 to 16 French. These larger-diameter introducers are rigid due to their diameter and the material used to construct them. This rigidity allows the large catheters to overcome the frictional forces needed to push the catheter through the valve.

But inserting smaller catheters into smaller introducers is more difficult. Typical introducers designed for smaller catheters (i.e., those 3 to 12 French in diameter) are made with open communication between the access site and the vascular system once the dilator is removed. This open configuration exists because smaller catheters, due to their smaller diameter and material, are not rigid enough to overcome the frictional forces needed to push the catheter through the valve. In other words, it is like trying to "push" a rope through a hole: the rope (i.e., catheter) does not remain rigid enough for a user to push it through the hole (i.e., valve).

The open configuration between the vascular system and the environment, however, allows two serious clinical problems. First, air embolism into the vascular system which can result in patient injury and/or death. And second, release of potentially infectious bodily fluids (including blood) into the environment, resulting in exposure to the health care provider.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The invention relates to tear-away and non-tear-away sheath introducers for catheters, methods for making such introducers, and methods for using such introducers. The sheath introducers contain movable valves that are encapsulated in a movable housing that allows the valve to move along the axis of the introducer. As the movable valve and housing travel along the axis, a portion of the hub protrudes past the valve and is exposed. As well, the sheath introducers can also contain a stationary valve and housing that can be opened to expose a portion of the hub when a conduit penetrates the stationary valve. The conduit can include a one-way valve actuator that can penetrate and open the valve, yet

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remain attached to a portion of the introducer when the introducer is split for removal from a patient. In both instances, the protruding portion of the hub contains a friction-free pathway for a catheter into the sheath introducer. The introducers can therefore be used with any catheter, regardless of the size or material, because of the reduced or eliminated frictional force between the catheter and introducer.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The following description of the invention can be understood in light of FIGS. 1-23, in which:

FIG. 1 is a side perspective view(s) of the introducer assembly in one aspect of the invention;

FIG. 2 is a side perspective view of a two-piece flexible valve in one aspect of the invention;

FIG. 3 is a side perspective view of a dilator in one aspect of the invention;

FIGS. 4 and 5 are section views of a valve housing in one aspect of the invention;

FIGS. 6 and 7 depict the introducer assembly in another aspect of the invention;

FIG. 8 is a side view(s) of the sheath introducer in another aspect of the invention;

FIG. 9 is a side perspective view(s) of the sheath introducer in even another aspect of the invention;

FIG. 10 is a side perspective view(s) of the sheath introducer in yet another aspect of the invention;

FIGS. 11-12 show a single-piece valve in another aspect of the invention;

FIGS. 13-14 depict view(s) of the single-piece valve and sheath hub in another aspect of the invention;

FIGS. 15-17 depict view(s) of methods of increasing the attachment between the sheath and the sheath hub in another aspect of the invention;

FIG. 18 shows the operation of the sheath introducer in one aspect of the invention;

FIG. 19 illustrates a conventional sheath introducer;

FIGS. 20-21 depict view(s) of methods of increasing the attachment between the sheath and the sheath hub in another aspect of the invention;

FIGS. 22-23 illustrate an introducer containing a stationary valve that is opened by a movable conduit;

FIGS. 24A and 24B depict perspective views of a sheath introducer including a stationary valve and valve actuator according to one embodiment;

FIG. 25 is a cross sectional side view of the sheath introducer of FIGS. 24A and 24B;

FIGS. 26A-26C are various views of the valve actuator of the sheath introducer of FIGS. 24A and 24B, according to one embodiment;

FIG. 27 is a perspective view of a top cap portion of a hub of the sheath introducer of FIGS. 24A and 24B; and

FIGS. 28A and 28B are cross sectional side views of the sheath introducer of FIGS. 24A and 24B, showing actuation of the valve actuator.

FIGS. 1-28B presented in conjunction with this description are views of only particular-rather than complete-portions of the devices and associated methods of making and using these devices. Together with the following description, the Figures demonstrate and explain the principles of the devices and associated methods. In the Figures, the thickness of layers and regions are exaggerated for clarity. The same reference numerals in different drawings represent the same element, and thus their descriptions will be omitted.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

The following description provides specific details in order to provide a thorough understanding of the invention. The

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skilled artisan, however, would understand that the invention could be practiced without employing these specific details. Indeed, the invention can be practiced by modifying the illustrated method and resulting device and can be used in conjunction with apparatus and techniques conventionally used in the industry. For example, the invention is described as a micro-introducer for small catheters (3F-10F in size), but could easily be adapted for any size of catheter or device regardless of the size or intended use. Further, while the invention is described for use with catheters for vascular access, it could be used with any similar device that is used to grant a physician (or other user) access to a part of the body, whether human or animal.

The invention includes a tear-away or non-tear-away sheath introducer that contains a movable valve and housing that when moved, allows a portion of the hub to protrude through a valve and be exposed. The protruding portion of the hub contains a friction-free pathway for the catheter. Any inducer having these properties can be used in the invention, including the sheath introducer described below and illustrated in the Figures.

The sheath introducer of the invention contains several primary components. First, dilator means used to dilate the vascular system and create a pathway for the catheter. Second, means for sheathing the dilator means to protect it from the vascular system. And third, valve means for keeping the pathway created by the dilator closed until the catheter needs to be inserted.

One example of the sheath introducer is illustrated in FIG. 1 where the introducer 10 contains dilation means comprised of a dilator hub 1 and a dilator shaft 2. The dilation means is configured to fit within the sheath means comprised of a sheath hub 7 and a sheath 8. The introducer 10 also contains valve means comprised of a valve with left and right halves (4 and 5) contained within valve housing having right and left halves (3 and 6) that is attached to the sheath hub 7.

FIGS. 2-5 illustrate detailed views of each of these components. FIG. 2 depicts one half of the valve 4, FIG. 3 illustrates the dilator 1, and FIGS. 4-5 show the different views of the valve housing 3. In FIG. 2, the valve contains retention means for retaining the valve to the valve housing. Any retention means known in the art can be used, including retention member 12 which seats into a corresponding structure in the valve housing such as the valve retention slot 15. The valve has a size and shape substantially the same as the inner part of the valve housing to which it is retained. Accordingly, the valve half 4 depicted in FIG. 2 is substantially circular and with a size that fits within the corresponding inner surface of the valve housing 3 shown in FIGS. 4-5. The valve can be manufactured from any suitable medical material, including flexible materials like silicone or polyurethane.

FIG. 3 depicts one example of a dilator of the introducer 10. The dilator 31 can contain any standard medical luer hub, including a hub 1 with a gripping mechanism (such as finger grips 11) and locking mechanism (such as locking ears 9) as shown in FIG. 3. The locking mechanism locks the dilator 31 into the valve housing by using, for example, the locking channel 16 contained in the valve housing 3 and 6. The dilator 31 also contains a shaft 2 with a tapered section for dilating the vessel into which it is inserted. The dilator 31 can also be manufactured from any suitable medical material, but should be made fairly rigid, yet flexible enough that it can be maneuvered into the desired vessel by a user.

FIGS. 4 and 5 depict one example of the internal geometry of the valve housing 3. The valve housing 3 contains any means for securing the valve housing to the sheath hub 7. In FIGS. 4 and 5, the securing means comprises snap features

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13, which secure the valve housing 3 to the sheath hub 7 using the mating snap feature 21 (shown in FIG. 6). Using the securing means keeps the valve housing (and therefore the valve) in a closed position until it is needed to be opened (i.e., such as when the catheter is inserted).

The valve housing 3 also contains any known means for positioning it with the sheath hub. An example of this positioning means is depicted in FIGS. 4 and 5, where a guide slot 15 and stop post 20 mate with the guidepost 22 of the sheath hub 7 (shown in FIG. 6). The exterior of the valve housing contains grips 14 that can be employed by the user in the splitting procedure. The valve housing 3 is constructed of any suitable medical material that provides the desired rigidity, such as rigid polymeric materials.

The valve housing 3 can also contain any known interlock mechanism between the two halves of the valve housing. An example of this interlock mechanism is lock 19 that, when the halves are assembled together, serves to maintain uniform travel between both halves of the valve housing. This interlock mechanism can be supplemented with any known mechanism, including the detachable interlock features 17 and 18.

FIGS. 6 and 7 illustrate the various components of the introducer when assembled together. In FIGS. 6 and 7, the sheath hub 7 and the sheath 8 are attached together into an assembly by any attachment means. Examples of suitable attachment means include insert molding or any mechanical attachment, such as a friction fit, locking snap fit, solvent or UV bond.

The sheath hub 7 contains several features for its operation. One such feature includes valve snap fit grooves and edges 21. These two components, along with the snap feature 13, work together to snap the valve housing 3 (and 6) to the sheath hub 7. Of course, any similar mechanism can be used to snap these two components to each other. The sheath hub 7 also contains the guide slot 22, as mentioned above, that guides the valve housing 3 (and 6) and the hub to the correct location relative to each other.

The sheath hub 7 also contains a valve penetration means. The valve penetration means operates to penetrate the two halves of the valve 4 and 5, thereby providing an opening in the valve. Any penetration means known in the art can be used for this function. As depicted in FIGS. 6 and 7, the penetration means comprise member 23 that is configured to fit between the two halves of the valve 4 and 5. The penetration member 23 opens the two halves of the valve when it is forced between them by any action which pushes the member 23 through the valve.

The valve penetration means need not physically force (i.e., push) the valve halves 4 and 5 apart to penetrate the valve. In this aspect of the invention, the member 23 penetrates the valve halves 4 and 5 when the valve housings are pulled apart to expose the member 23. The valve housings can be pulled apart by the mechanisms described below.

When the penetration member 23 opens the valve in either of these manners, port 24 is exposed. The port 24 is the location where the catheter (or similar device) is inserted. Unlike the conventional introducers where the catheter is forced between the valve (which creates a friction force that must be overcome by a user), the catheter can be inserted in the port 24 of the introducers. The port 24 can be configured to have less friction than that required in conventional devices by providing an inside diameter slightly larger than that of the catheter insertion member. Alternatively, the port can be configured to have substantially no friction ("friction-free") by providing an inside diameter significantly larger than that of the catheter insertion member. As well, the port 24 can be

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configured to have less or substantially no friction by providing a coating on the inside of the port 24 and/or the outside of the catheter.

The sheath hub 7 also contains activation means. The activation means is used to force the penetration member 23 up through the valve halves 4 and 5, move the valve halves (and housing) down over the member 23, or to pull the valve halves apart, to thereby open them and expose member 23 containing port 24. Any mechanism that operates in this manner can be used as the activation means. In the sheath hub depicted in FIG. 8, the activation means pulls the valve halves apart and comprises a reaction force member 25 that is formed on the bottom edge of the sheath hub 7. When pressure is applied to the reaction force member 25 by the user, it depresses the valve housings 3 and 6 and forces the valve halves 4 and 5 apart. Of course, any other known mechanism could be used to push or pull the valve apart.

FIG. 8 depicts the introducer in a position ready to accept a catheter. In FIG. 8, the penetration member 23 protrudes out of the valve halves 4 and 5. The penetration member 23 need only protrude enough so that port 24 is exposed enough for a catheter to be inserted. Typically, the port 24 protrudes from about 0.025 to about 0.05 inches above the valve. In one aspect of the invention, the port 24 protrudes about 0.05 inches above the valve.

FIG. 9 depicts one part of a method for using the introducer 10. After the introducer 10 has been inserted into the desired vessel, the catheter (not shown) is inserted through the introducer. Then, the user presses on the grips 14 to cause the valve housing 3 and 6 to separate from each other. As the pressing continues, the valve halves 4 and 5 and the sheath hub 7 then separate from each other. Once this initial separation has occurred, the user can continue pull on the ends of the separated portions to continue separating the introducer.

FIG. 10 illustrates another part of a method for using the introducer 10. In step 1, the introducer 10 has been inserted in the desired part of the vascular system, i.e., the desired vessel. Next, as shown in step 2, the dilator is then removed from the introducer. As shown in step 3, removing the dilator still leaves the valve in a closed position. Next, using the actuating mechanism a user makes the penetration member penetrate the valve in any of the methods described above so that valve is opened with the port 24 exposed. Then, the catheter (not shown) is inserted into the introducer as shown in step 4. Finally, the introducer is removed by the splitting procedure as shown in step 5.

In some embodiments, the introducer can be configured so that the valve is stationary. In these embodiments, the stationary valve can be opened to expose a portion of a hub when conduit means penetrate the stationary valve. With a portion of the hub exposed, the catheter can then be inserted as described above.

One example of these embodiments is illustrated in FIGS. 22-23. FIG. 22 depicts an assembled introducer 105 without a dilator. The assembled introducer 105 contains a sheath hub bottom 107 containing a sheath hub top 118, and valve means comprised of a stationary valve 104 contained within a valve housing 106. The assembled introducer 105 also contains conduit means (i.e., conduit 110) that can move along the axis of the assembled introducer 105.

The valve 104 can be configured to be stationary within the assembled introducer 105 using any known mechanism. In the embodiments illustrated in FIGS. 22-23, the valve 104 is configured to be stationary by matching the extensions 112 of the valve with corresponding indentations 114 within a press fit generated between the sheath hub top 118 and valve housing 106. In other instances, though, the extensions 112 could

be configured to match indentations made in the valve housing **106** (not shown). In yet other instances, the valve can be configured to be stationary by means of any known adhesive.

The valve housing **106** houses the stationary valve **104** and therefore the bottom of the housing **106** can be configured to substantially match the shape of the valve **104**. As well, since the valve housing **106** is located on the sheath hub top **118**, the bottom of the valve housing **106** can be configured to substantially match the upper surface of the sheath hub top **118**. As depicted in FIG. **22**, these matching surfaces can be substantially flat. But any other matching shapes for these surfaces can be used, including ridged, notched, or an interlocking snap fit.

The valve housing **106** also surrounds the conduit means (i.e., conduit **110**). Accordingly, the inner surface of the valve housing can be configured to substantially match the outer surface of the conduit **110**. As depicted in FIG. **22**, these two matching surfaces can be configured as substantially circular in shape. But other geometries for these surfaces can be used, including substantially rectangular, substantially oval, substantially polygonal, or a male/female keyway.

The conduit **110** moves along the axis of the assembled introducer **105** from a first position shown in FIG. **22** to a second position shown in FIG. **23**. In the first position, the bottom **115** of the conduit remains above the closed valve. In the second position, the bottom **115** of the conduit has pierced the valve and forced the valve into an open position. With the valve in this open position, a catheter can be inserted through the conduit **110** and into the sheath **108**.

In other embodiments, the conduit **110** can move into an intermediate position anywhere between the first and second positions. The intermediate position can be selected so that the valve is opened by any desired amount. For example, the intermediate position for the conduit **110** can be selected so that a partially opened valve would allow only a small amount of blood to be exposed, ensuring that the introducer was located correctly in a vein.

The conduit means can have any configuration allowing it to operate in this manner. Thus, the outer surface of the conduit can be configured to be slightly smaller than the inner surface of the valve housing, allowing the conduit to move easily relative to the valve housing. If desired, additional mechanisms like depth control detents, springs, or coatings can be used to increase—or, if necessary, decrease—the ability of the outer surface of the conduit to move relative to the inner surface of the valve housing.

In some instances, the outer surface of the conduit **110** and the inner surface of the valve housing **106** can be configured so that the conduit can be retained in the first and second positions. Any retaining means known in the art can be used, such as markings, depth control detents, springs, threads or the retaining means illustrated in FIGS. **22-23**. In these Figures, the retaining means comprises at least one notch **121** on the outer surface of the conduit **110** that substantially matches indentations **123** and **125** on the inner surface of the valve housing **106**. The two (or more) sets of indentations are located where the notch **121** will insert when the conduit **110** is in the first and second positions.

The bottom **115** of the conduit **110** can be configured so that it pierces and opens the stationary valve **104**. Thus, the bottom **115** of the conduit can be configured with any shape that will operate in this manner. In some instances, the bottom **115** is typically given a substantially pointed or substantially tapered shape. The bottom of the conduit can therefore initially open the valve and as the conduit moves further down, the opening in the valve becomes wider and wider allowing for a substantially friction-free passage way through the

valve. In some instances, the bottom of the conduit can be rounded to prevent damage to the valve.

The top **127** of the conduit **110** can be configured with any shape so that it guides the placement of the catheter. One example of such a shape is depicted in FIGS. **22** and **23** where the top of the conduit comprises a substantial conical shape. The conical shape guides the placement of the catheter through the top of the conduit and into the inner chamber **120** of the conduit **110**. The conical shape can, in certain instances, be smooth and rounded so that it is easier to be pushed by a user to open the valve.

Once the assembled introducer **105** is located in the desired location, the user can open the valve easily by pressing on the top of the conduit means. This action forces the conduit **110** from the first position into the second position, and opens the valve. The user can then place the tip of a catheter in the top of the conduit. As the user pushes on the catheter, the tip is guided from the top of the conduit **110**, through the inner chamber **120**, past the opened valve, out the bottom of the conduit, and then into the sheath **108**.

Reference is now made to FIGS. **24A-28B**, which describe various aspects of a sheath introducer including a stationary valve that can be opened via penetration of conduit, according to one example embodiment. As it shares various aspects in common with the sheath introducers described in previous embodiments, only selected details regarding the present sheath introducer are described below.

As shown in FIGS. **24A**, **24B**, and **25**, the introducer **205** includes a stationary slit valve **204** housed in a sheath hub **207**, which in turn is disposed at the proximal end of the sheath **108**. The sheath hub **207** includes a top cap **206** that is placed atop the valve **204**. Though a slit valve is depicted here, other types of valves may also be employed in the introducer. As before, the valve **204** includes extensions **212** on a bottom surface thereof that are received into corresponding indentations **214** defined in the sheath hub **207** to enable the valve to seat therein.

A valve actuator **210** is also shown in FIGS. **24A**, **24B**, and serves as one example of a conduit to open an introducer valve, such as the valve **204**. As shown in FIG. **25**, the actuator **210** is received in a cavity **240** defined by the hub top cap **206** and is movable by a user to selectively open the valve **204** in preparation for insertion through the introducer of a catheter or other device, as will be described. Note that, though configured as separate pieces, the hub **207** and top cap **206** can be integrally formed. Note further that the valve actuator **210** in the present embodiment is substantially coaxial with the longitudinal axis of the introducer **205**, though in other embodiments the actuator can be off-center with respect to the longitudinal axis.

Reference is now made to FIGS. **26A-26C**, which depict further details regarding the actuator **210** as an example of a conduit according to the present embodiment. As shown, the actuator **210** includes a bottom **215**, a top **227**, and a conduit pathway **220** defined therebetween. The top **227** includes a ridge and is defined so as to enable a user of the introducer to press the actuator **210** with a downward force in order to selectively open the valve **204** with the actuator bottom **215**. An extended surface **215A** is included at the actuator bottom **215** and is shaped so as to penetrate the slit valve **204** when the actuator is pushed downward, thus opening the valve and enabling a catheter to pass through both the conduit pathway **220** of the actuator and the valve with minimal resistance. In the present embodiment the extended surface **215A** is shaped as a partial cylinder to define a C-shaped cross sectional shape, but it is appreciated that other shapes and configurations are possible for the extended shapes in other embodi-

ments. For instance, in one embodiment the extended surface could define a U-shaped cross sectional shape.

As mentioned, the conduit pathway **220** extends through the actuator **210** to enable a catheter to pass therethrough after the actuator has opened the valve **204**. In the present embodiment, the surface of the conduit pathway **220** is conically shaped so as to guide the catheter in its passage through the actuator. As best seen in FIG. **26A**, the actuator **210** includes a longitudinally extending channel defined through the side of the actuator body. The channel **230** enables the catheter to pass through and be released from the actuator after placement in the patient vasculature during peel-away of the introducer sheath from the vessel insertion site. Note that, though it is non-splittable in the present embodiment, the actuator in another embodiment can be formed as splittable.

FIGS. **26A-26C** further depict a plurality of interference features defined on the side of the body of the actuator **210**. In the present embodiment the interference features include a plurality of teeth **232** circumferentially defined in a longitudinally stacked arrangement about a portion of the actuator body. The teeth **232** circumferentially extend from either side of the channel **230** to a raised tongue **234** also defined on the side of the actuator **210** opposite the channel. Of course, other interference features in addition to what is described herein, including features disposed at other locations on the actuator, are contemplated.

The teeth **232** of the actuator **210** are configured to engage with corresponding interference features defined in the cavity **240** of the top cap **206**, namely, teeth **242** defined on the inside surface of the cavity. FIG. **27** shows the top cap **206** in an exploded state along its split line, and further depicts the various locations for the teeth **242** according to the present embodiment. The locations of the teeth **242** are configured to enable the top cap teeth to engage with the teeth **232** of the actuator **210** when the actuator is pressed downward into the top cap cavity **240** in order to open the valve **204**. The teeth **242** of the top cap cavity **240** are configured to engage the actuator teeth **232** in such a way as to enable further downward (one-way) movement of the actuator, but to prevent upward actuator movement. In other embodiments, however, it is appreciated that the actuator can be configured to be resettable or reversible, via a spring and two-way interference features for instance, so as to enable the actuator to be pressed downward to open the valve, yet be upwardly retractable so as to close the valve again, if desired.

Grooves **244** are defined on the inside surface of the top cap cavity **240** to engage with the tongue **234** defined on the side of the actuator **210** when the actuator is received in the top cap cavity. Engagement of the actuator tongue **234** with one of the top cap cavity grooves **244** enables the actuator to slide longitudinally within the cavity **240**, while causing the actuator to retain physical engagement with the respective half of the top cap **206** when the top cap, together with the rest of the introducer **205**, is split apart in order to remove it from the vessel insertion site. In brief, the side surfaces of the teeth **242** adjacent the groove of the top cap cavity **240** are angled such that the actuator tongue **234** is captured in and retained by the groove, even when the top cap is split. This prevents the actuator **210** from falling out of the introducer **205** when split. Thus, the tongue **234** and/or grooves **244** operate as retaining members and therefore serve as one example of means for preventing separation of the valve actuator from a portion of the hub when hub is split. Note, however, that other means for providing this functionality may be included in the introducer. For instance, the valve actuator can be attached to a portion of the sheath hub by a living hinge, a tether, a mag-

netic feature, etc. These and other means for preventing such separation are therefore contemplated.

The top cap **206** includes tabs **246** that are configured to be received by corresponding grooves **248** (FIG. **25**) defined in the sheath hub **207** in order to mate the top cap with the sheath hub and secure the valve **204** in a sandwiched configuration therebetween. The engagement between the top cap **206** and the sheath hub **207** can be secured mechanically (e.g., snap-fit), adhesively, or by other bonding methods (e.g., ultrasonic bonding). In the present embodiment, the composition of the actuator **210** includes polypropylene, but in other embodiments an acrylic, e.g., polymethyl methacrylate, or other thermoplastic or thermoset may be employed for forming the actuator. In one embodiment, the actuator **210** is colored to indicate the French size of the introducer **205**. The principles of the present embodiment may be extended to introducers of a variety of French sizes, as was described in connection with previous embodiments.

Reference is made to FIGS. **28A** and **28B** in describing the opening of the valve **204** by the actuator **210** of the introducer **205**. As shown in FIG. **28A**, with the actuator **210** in an upward first position, the extended surface **215A** of the actuator is above and is not in contact with the valve **204**. This configuration is useful for reducing the risk of air embolism and/or blood leakage via the introducer **205** while the introducer is partially inserted into a vessel of the patient. When the actuator **210** is pressed downward by the user, as shown in FIG. **28B**, the actuator is moved from the first position to the second position where it is brought into contact with the valve **204** such that the extended surface **215A** penetrates the slit of the valve, thus opening the valve. Note that the movement of the valve actuator **210** from the first position to the second position is performed in one embodiment via direct finger pressure on the valve actuator in a direction that is substantially coaxial with a longitudinal axis of the valve actuator. This results in a balanced force imparted on the introducer during valve opening.

This provides a clear path via the actuator conduit pathway **220** for the catheter to pass through actuator, sheath hub **207**, and sheath **108** for placement in the patient's vasculature. Later, when the catheter is placed, the introducer **205** can be split and removed from the vessel insertion site. Upon splitting, the tongue and groove engagement of the actuator **210** with the top cap cavity **240** enables the actuator to be retained with a corresponding split portion of the top cap **206**. During the introducer splitting and removal, the already-placed catheter will pass through the actuator channel **230** to free the catheter from the actuator, as the actuator is non-splittable in the present embodiment.

In one embodiment, the composition of the sheath hub **207** includes a clear material, such as acrylic, e.g., polymethyl methacrylate, so as to enable the sheath hub to be translucent. This in turn enables a lower portion **240A** of the cavity **240** (FIG. **28B**) defined in the sheath hub **207** to be visible by the user. So configured, the cavity lower portion **240A** can be observed, such as to determine when venous access has been established as evidenced by the sight of blood in the cavity lower portion. In one embodiment, one or more magnifiers **250** can be formed in the sheath hub **207**, as seen in FIGS. **24A** and **24B**, to assist in observation of the cavity lower portion **240A**. The magnifiers can be defined by any acceptable process, including overmolding, post-manufacture machining, etc. Also, the surface of the sheath hub **207** can be polished to increase visibility therethrough.

The introducers described above can be modified and enhanced with several optional features. One of these modifications is a modified valve **30** as depicted in FIGS. **11** and **12**

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that comprises a base 32, extensions 34, and channel portion 36. The base 32 of the valve 30 is configured with a size and shape substantially similar to the valve housing in which the valve 30 rests. The valve 30 can optionally contain an indentation 35 of any shape and size that will help the valve split.

The extensions 34 are designed to extend upwards from the valve 30 towards the dilator of the introducer. Like the base 32, the extensions 34 will abut the valve housing, but the sides rather than the bottom. Accordingly, the size and shape of the extensions 34 are selected to substantially match the inner surface of the valve housing which will enclose the valve 30. The extensions 34 contain a notch(es) 38 that correspond to the notches 50 provided in the protruding member 41 (as described below).

The channel portion 36 of the valve 30 also extends in an upward direction toward the dilator of the introducer. As shown in FIG. 12, the inner surface 37 of the channel portion 36 will abut the outer surface of the outside of the protruding member 41 and is accordingly given a size and shape substantially matching the protruding member 41. The length of the channel portion 36 is also selected to substantially match the protruding member 41 so that port 44 can be exposed when desired.

The upper surface 42 of the channel portion contains a slit 40. The slit 40 does not extend the entire way across the channel portion 36 and so is a non-tear away slit. The slit 40 is held in a closed or sealed position (position A in FIG. 13) by the valve housing and sheath hub. The slit 40 moves into an open position B when the protruding member 41 moves upward through the channel portion 36 and then up through the slit 40 (or the valve 30 moves downward over the member 41) as depicted in FIG. 13. Of course, as described above, the valve 30 can be pulled apart to expose the protruding member 41 rather than forced apart.

The channel portion 36 of the valve 30 can also operate as a sealing means around the protruding member 41. The sealing means helps provide a seal between the vascular system and the environment when the protruding member 41 has forced the slit 40 open. This sealing function is illustrated in FIG. 13 where the protruding member 41 is shown in its extended state, i.e., protruding above the valve 30. The channel portion 36 fits snugly around protruding member 41 so that it provides a seal. Optionally, a coating can be added to the inside of the channel portion 36 and/or the outside of the protruding member 41 to increase this sealing function. As shown in FIG. 12, the channel portion 36 can optionally contain a ring sealing member(s) 39 to increase the sealing function.

The advantage of valve 30 is that it can also serve as a flash-back chamber. If the valve 30 (and associated parts of the hub sheath) is made from a translucent or transparent material, it allows the user to view the inside of the valve 30. If sheath introducer 10 is placed in the proper location (i.e., in the venous system), blood will enter the valve chamber resulting in a red color as an indication that the sheath introducer is placed correctly. Using a translucent or transparent material for the valve 30 therefore allows the user to look through the valve and determine whether this red color is showing.

As mentioned above, a seal can be formed between the channel portion 36 and the protruding member 41. To help improve the seal between these two components, the protruding member 41 can be modified by providing stress risers (45 and 46) on the inside 40 and the outside 41 of the protruding member 41 as shown in FIG. 14. The internal stress riser 46 provides a smooth surface at the interface with the valve ring sealing member 39. As noted above, the valve ring sealing member 39 can provide a seal as the valve translates along the

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stem. Moving from the bottom to the top of the protruding member 41, the riser(s) 45 begin on the outside and then move to the inside 46, allowing the splitting mechanism (crack) to progress while maintaining a smooth outer surface between the valve ring sealing member 39 and the protruding member 41.

The stress riser 45 begins on the bottom of the sheath hub 47 and continues along the outside of the sheath hub until the stress riser 45 reaches a point below the initial location of the valve ring sealing member 39. At that point, the stress riser 46 moves to the inside of the protruding member 41 and then continues to the notch 50. The depth and width of the stress risers 45 and 46 are selected depending on the required separation force.

Another function of the stress risers 45 and 46 are to act as an initiator in the splitting process. By their nature, the stress risers are the beginning of a split in the hub sheath 47 and, therefore, can be used to make the splitting process easier. Accordingly, the stress risers 45 and 46 are located substantially on the axis where the introducer 10 will be split.

Another optional modification that can be made to the sheath introducer comprises notches 50 in the upper portion of the protruding member 41 that remain above the valve 30 in the extended position. The notches 50 give the protruding member 41 additional length to extend past the valve 30 while at the same time not adding additional length to the stress risers 45 and 46. Such a configuration adds length to the protruding member 41 without increasing the cracking force needed to split the introducer 10.

As shown in FIG. 14, the notches 50 are generally made to correspond with the same location as the stress risers 45 and 46, i.e., substantially along the axis of the expected split. The notches 50 can have any shape that results in a concentration of the stress force. Examples of such shapes include substantial "V" shape or the substantial rectangular shape shown in FIG. 14.

The sheath hub 47 can also be optionally modified to increase the attachment between the sheath hub 47 and the sheath 53. One manner to increase this attachment is depicted in FIGS. 15 and 16. In FIG. 15, the sheath has been modified to contain a sheath cap 57 with an interlocking fit between the sheath 53 and the sheath cap 57. The sheath cap 57 contains grooves 58 which provide a location for the split ends 55 of the sheath 53 when the sheath is inserted through the sheath cap 57. The ends of the split sheath fold around the sheath retention cap 57 with their location maintained in the grooves 58. Once the sheath retention cap 57 is assembled into the mating geometry of the sheath hub 47 as shown in FIG. 16, it locks the ends 55 of the split sheath tightly into the hub 47. The sheath cap 57 is then affixed to the sheath hub 47.

In some embodiments, the sheath cap 57 can be affixed to the sheath hub 47 by means of a thermal, solvent or UV bond. In other embodiments, the sheath cap 57 can be affixed to the sheath hub 47 using a mechanical connection as known in the art, including a friction fit, snap fit, or ultrasonic weld. One example of such a mechanical connection is illustrated in FIG. 20, where the sheath hub 47 had been provided with a connector 72 containing male connections 71. The sheath cap 57 has also been provided with a corresponding shape and size that will mate with the connector 72, including female connections 73. When the sheath cap 57 is moved towards the sheath hub 47, the male connection 71 slides into the female connection 73 and attaches the hub 47 and the cap 57 to each other. Because of its shape, the cap 57 will also mate with the connector 72 and can be configured, as shown in FIG. 20, to retain the ends 74 of the sheath 53 between them.

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Another method to increase the attachment sheath hub **47** and the sheath **53** is illustrated in FIG. **21**. As shown in FIG. **21**, the sheath cap **57** has been modified to contain extensions **75** that run substantially parallel to the body of the sheath hub **47**. The extensions **75** have been configured to substantially match the body of sheath hub **47**. Likewise, the body of sheath hub **47** has been configured to match the extensions of sheath cap **57**. Although many matching configurations can be used, the extensions **75** contain ridges **77** that will substantially match notches **79** in the sheath hub. When the sheath cap **57** is moved towards the sheath hub **47**, the ridges **77** slides into the notches **79** and attaches the hub **47** and the cap **57** to each other.

A similar, but different, configuration is depicted in FIGS. **22-23**. In these Figures, the sheath hub bottom **107** has been modified to contain extensions **175** that run substantially parallel to the body of the sheath hub top **118**. The extensions **175** have been configured to substantially match the body of sheath hub top **118**. Likewise, the body of sheath hub top **108** has been configured to match the extensions of sheath hub bottom **107**. Although many matching configurations can be used, the extensions **175** contain ridges **177** that will substantially match notches **179** in the sheath hub top **118** and then wrap over the ends **180** of the sheath hub bottom **107**. When the sheath hub bottom **107** is moved towards the sheath hub top **118**, the ridges **177** slides into the notches **179** and attaches the hub top **118** and the sheath hub bottom **107** to each other, with the wrapping portions of the sheath hub bottom **107** aiding the attachment.

Alternatively, another method to increase this attachment is depicted in FIG. **17**. In FIG. **17**, the sheath hub **47** has been modified to encapsulate an end portion of the sheath **53**. This encapsulation is performed so that ridges **59** overlie the end **56** of the sheath **53**, thereby retaining the end of the sheath underneath the ridges.

In yet another modification, the sheath introducer can be provided with means for separating the valve housing **33** away from the sheath hub **47**. Any known means for forcing these two components apart can be used in the invention, including leaf spring, coil spring, hinge, and/or a mechanical lever. As depicted in FIG. **18**, the forcing means comprises a spring **65**. In its compressed state, the valve housing **33** and the sheath hub **47** are attached to each other by any mechanism, such as the snap features **13** and **21** mentioned above and/or the lever **66**. When the valve housing **33** and the sheath hub **47** are attached, the valve **30** remains closed. The moment the user separates the sheath hub **47** from the valve housing **33** by pressing on the grip section **52** (and/or disengaging the lever **66**), the spring **65** is released from its compressed state and these two components separate from each other.

One result of the separation of these two components is the movement of valve **30** relative to the protruding member **41**. When these two components are attached to each other, the spring is compressed and the valve **30** slides down the protruding member which then opens the slit **40** of the valve **30**. When these components are separated, the pressure of the spring **65** is released and it returns to the uncompressed state, sliding the valve **30** back up the protruding member and closing the slit **40**.

In another modification, the valve housing of the introducer could be engaged by means of a rotary movement along the axis of a threaded member or any other mechanical means to translate the valve housing along the desired path. For example, a mechanical lever, push button, or threaded member could be used in this modification.

In addition to any previously indicated variation, numerous other modifications and alternative arrangements may be

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devised by those skilled in the art without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention and appended claims are intended to cover such modifications and arrangements. Thus, while the invention has been described above with particularity and detail in connection with what is presently deemed to be the most practical and preferred aspects of the invention, it will be apparent to those of ordinary skill in the art that numerous modifications, including but not limited to, form, function, manner of operations and use may be made without departing from the principles and concepts set forth herein.

What is claimed is:

1. A splittable sheath introducer, comprising:

a splittable sheath;

a splittable hub disposed at a proximal end of the splittable sheath;

a valve included with the splittable hub; and

a valve actuator movable from a first position to a second position, the valve actuator opening the valve when in the second position, the valve actuator including a retaining member that enables the valve actuator to be retained by a portion of the splittable hub when the splittable sheath introducer is split apart.

2. The splittable sheath introducer according to claim 1, wherein the valve actuator engages a corresponding retaining member of the splittable hub such that the valve actuator is retained by a portion of the splittable hub when the splittable sheath introducer is split apart.

3. The splittable sheath introducer according to claim 2, wherein the retaining member of the valve actuator includes one or more notches extending from an outer surface of the valve actuator, and wherein the corresponding retaining member of the splittable hub includes one or more indentations on an inner surface of the splittable hub.

4. The splittable sheath introducer according to claim 1, wherein the valve actuator includes a top surface that enables the valve actuator to be pressed by a user from the first position to the second position.

5. The splittable sheath introducer according to claim 1, wherein a bottom portion of the valve actuator includes an extended surface that opens the valve when the valve actuator is in the second position.

6. A method for inserting a catheter, comprising:

providing a splittable sheath introducer, the splittable sheath introducer including a splittable sheath, a splittable sheath hub disposed at a proximal end of the splittable sheath, the splittable sheath hub including a first retaining member, a valve disposed in the splittable sheath hub, and a valve actuator disposed in a cavity of the splittable sheath hub, the valve actuator including a second retaining member configured to mate with the first retaining member;

inserting a distal portion of the splittable sheath into a portion of a body of a patient;

moving the valve actuator from a first position to a second position so as to open the valve and mate the first retaining member with the second retaining member;

inserting a catheter into the body of the patient through the open valve and the splittable sheath via a conduit defined by the valve actuator; and

splitting the splittable sheath introducer such that the valve actuator remains attached to a portion of the splittable sheath hub after the splittable sheath introducer is split apart.

7. The method for inserting as defined in claim 6, wherein providing a splittable sheath introducer includes providing a first retaining member in the form of one or more indentations

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on an inner surface of the splittable sheath hub and providing a second retaining member in the form of one or more notches extending from an outer surface of the valve actuator.

8. The method for inserting as defined in claim 6, wherein moving the valve actuator further comprises moving the valve actuator from a first position to a second position via direct finger pressure on the valve actuator in a direction that is axially aligned with the valve actuator.

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